



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
31 March 2021

Original: English

For decision

United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

Annual session 2021

1–4 June 2021

Item 8 of the provisional agenda*

Management response to the annual report for 2020 on the evaluation function in UNICEF

Summary

In accordance with the Executive Board decision 2013/13, the present document provides the management response to the annual report for 2020 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2021/18](#)). The management response addresses the key elements of the evaluation report, including the use of innovative tools and approaches, the governance and influence of the function, its role in the context of the reform of the United Nations development system and the coverage and quality of evaluations performed in 2020.

Elements of a decision for consideration by the Executive Board are provided in section IX.

* [E/ICEF/2021/9](#).

Note: The present document was processed in its entirety by UNICEF.



I. Overview

1. This management response has been prepared by the management of UNICEF in response to the annual report for 2020 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2021/18](#)). It comments on the contributions of the function during the year and the key corporate evaluations referred to in the report. It also addresses the use of innovative tools and approaches by the function, its governance and influence at the organizational level and its role in the context of the United Nations development system reform.
2. The evaluation function remains on track in implementing the evaluation policy ([E/ICEF/2018/14](#)) and the plan for global evaluations, 2018–2021 ([E/ICEF/2018/3](#)), with noticeable results in 2020 despite the challenging situation due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Management acknowledges the efforts and commitment of the evaluation function to introduce and use innovative technologies, tools and approaches allowing for faster turnaround times for findings and recommendations and contributing to accelerating opportunities for decision-making and programmatic adjustment.
3. Management commends the increasing coverage and quality of evaluations and the trend towards more strategic evaluations, including impact evaluations and country programme evaluations. The continued efforts in ensuring that gender equality and humanitarian action are addressed, along with the introduction of considerations related to children with disabilities in evaluations are well noted.
4. Management is pleased to note that in 2020, an independent quality assessment of UNICEF evaluations rated 97 per cent of them as “exceptional”, “highly satisfactory” or “satisfactory”. These results indicate that the increased capacity for technical advice, quality assurance and oversight by the multi-country evaluation specialists, financed with resources from the Evaluation Pooled Fund, is making a difference. Management will continue to encourage assessments of emerging topics and to place learning at the centre of the organization’s work.
5. Management welcomes the results of the evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021. This was the first evaluation of a UNICEF strategic plan, conducted with the primary purpose of (a) assessing the use of the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 as a tool for guiding and managing UNICEF activities; (b) facilitating learning from UNICEF experience; and (c) providing actionable strategic and planning process recommendations for the upcoming strategic planning cycle. The evaluation provided critical evidence to inform the design of the new strategic plan and all recommendations were agreed to by management.
6. Management gladly received the conclusions and recommendations of several corporate evaluations that were conducted in 2020, including the evaluation of the response to Cyclone Idai, which was the first evaluation to assess the contribution of the new scale-up activation mechanism since its adoption by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in 2018; the inter-agency humanitarian evaluation on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; the evaluation of UNICEF work in urban settings; and the evaluation of water, sanitation and hygiene programming in protracted crises. Management particularly acknowledges all contributions made that allowed for a rapid organizational response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
7. Management notes the reduction of UNICEF expenditure on evaluation as a percentage of the total programme expenditure to 0.64 per cent, which was partially attributable to the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Management is committed to making renewed efforts in gradually reaching the expenditure

benchmark of 1 per cent, depending on the impact of the pandemic on the organization's ability to complete evaluations. To maximize the use of evaluations' findings and recommendations, increased investment in broader data collection and the availability of outcome-level data for programmes is required.

8. Management expresses satisfaction that the evaluation function successfully completed its programme of work for 2020 and reaffirms its commitment to the strengthening of the function.

II. UNICEF evaluation in a changing world: adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic

A. Innovative technologies for evaluation

9. Management appreciates the efforts to introduce a wider variety of evaluative instruments that allow for increased real-time decision-making, oversight and learning, as well as efforts to address emerging programmatic themes. This includes the roll-out of a multi-regional mobile phone population survey called the Community Rapid Assessment to track behaviours and their drivers during the pandemic in real-time, allowing for immediate use for making programmatic adjustments when needed. Management also acknowledges the potential of using mobile phone data, including through the U-Report platform, as has been applied in the UNICEF evaluation of the complex high-threat level 3 emergencies in Nigeria and the joint evaluation on the third phase of the joint programme of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)-UNICEF Joint Programme to Eliminate Female Genital Mutilation.

B. Innovative approaches to evaluation

10. Management commends the adaptations made to immediately apply innovative approaches in evaluation and identify new evidence needs to support the organization in rapidly adapting to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The emphasis on evaluative evidence for continuous learning and adaptive management, combined with the real-time assessment of the ongoing UNICEF response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the country level, provided valuable insights, and management is committed to applying the lessons learned from these initiatives to responses to future sudden changes in the global context.

11. Management also recognizes the implementation of more thematic evaluative efforts to respond to the effect of the pandemic on the lives of children and their families, including the rapid assessment of the COVID-19 crisis impact and prospective social protection responses, and the education response to COVID-19: rapid evidence synthesis on teaching and learning. Both provided important programmatic insights to further respond to the pandemic.

C. New and emerging topics

12. Management is encouraged by efforts to evaluate new and emerging topics, including through the readiness assessment on climate and the environment, the results of which directly informed the design of the Climate, Energy, Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction Strategic Action Plan of the organization. Management also takes note of the nearly completed thematic evaluation on the UNICEF work on the link between humanitarian and development programming.

III. UNICEF evaluation in a reforming United Nations

13. Management is pleased with the contributions of the UNICEF evaluation function in 2020 to promoting joint and system-wide evaluations in line with the reform of the United Nations development system to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It notes the continued UNICEF contributions to system-wide efforts to strengthen the evaluation function, including through its participation in various initiatives of the United Nations Evaluation Group and the key role UNICEF fulfilled in the virtual 2020 evaluation practice exchange. Management also appreciates all efforts made in rolling out the system-wide evaluation of the COVID-19 response.

14. Management notes the continued efforts and partnerships to advance the evaluation function in the United Nations. It appreciates the conclusion of the evaluability assessment of the common chapter of the strategic plans, 2018–2021 of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNFPA, UNICEF and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). Management is also encouraged by the conclusion of five joint humanitarian evaluations as well as the implementation of two joint evaluations at the country level with several other agencies, funds and programmes.

IV. Evaluation coverage and quality under the new evaluation policy

A. Evaluation submission, coverage and thematic distribution

15. Management commends the continued growth in the number and coverage of evaluations since 2018, with an increase to 140 evaluation submissions in 2020, noting that 24 evaluations were conducted in 2019 but submitted in 2020. Management recognizes that the increasing number of evaluations is also the result of the strengthening of the evaluation capacity in the regions through the establishment of multi-country evaluation specialists, financed with resources from the Evaluation Pooled Fund. These newly hired specialists provided timely technical assistance and quality assurance of evaluations commissioned by country offices. The efforts on generating other evaluative products, allowing for faster turnaround for organizational learning, including in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, are much appreciated.

16. Management notes the increasing evaluation coverage in all regions. It is encouraged by the high percentage (98 per cent) of country offices that implemented at least one evaluation since 2018 and by the fact that the countries without an evaluation since 2018 have initiated at least one evaluation.

17. Management appreciates the broad coverage of evaluations across the goal areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 and the continued efforts to mirror the evaluation thematic coverage with the programme expenditure by goal area. Also, management notes the increase in the proportion of evaluations that incorporate the cross-cutting theme of humanitarian action.

18. Management commends the emphasis to provide evidence in supporting the integration of gender considerations into evaluations and assessments as shown by the results of the UNICEF Development Effectiveness Review, 2016–2019. This review affirmed an increase in the percentage of evaluations reporting improvements towards gender equality. This is also shown by the consistent score of ‘meets requirements’ as indicated by the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

19. Management welcomes the commitment to consider disability in evaluations, as highlighted in this year's annual report on the evaluation function in UNICEF. It notes the inclusion of disability markers in the Evidence Information Systems Integration (EISI) platform and additional questions on disability as part of the Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System (GEROS), indicating the extent to which disability considerations are covered in evaluations.

B. Evaluation quality

20. Management commends the high ratings of the evaluation quality, with 97 percent of the 140 evaluations produced in 2020 rated as good quality by an independent assessment. It notes that the investment made in strengthening technical assistance and quality assurance capacity, by creating posts for multi-country evaluation specialists with resources from the Evaluation Pooled Fund, is contributing to maintaining high ratings.

21. Management is encouraged that evaluations of exceptional quality were produced by different types of country offices. This includes the evaluation of the country programme of cooperation between the Government of Madagascar and UNICEF (2015–2019); the evaluation of the country programme of cooperation between the Government of Uzbekistan and UNICEF (2016–2020); the assessment of the school-wide positive behaviour intervention and support initiative in Jamaica; the evaluation of the UNICEF youth economic engagement programme in Jordan; the multi-country summative evaluation of child-friendly school programmes in Guinea-Bissau; and the evaluation of the parenting education programme in Sao Tome and Principe.

C. Evaluation level and type

22. Management is pleased with the growing number of strategic evaluations, including 15 impact evaluations. It also notes the number of country programme evaluations (17) that informed the design of new country programmes, and the evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 that provided important insights and recommendations for the new strategic plan. The growing support for the implementation of country-led evaluations in 2020, as was the case in the Central African Republic, Fiji, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Zambia, is also noted.

V. Maintaining strong governance for evaluation in UNICEF

A. Governance

23. Management acknowledges the emphasis on strong governance for the evaluation function, including the valuable oversight and guidance provided by the UNICEF Executive Board, the Audit Advisory Committee, the Global Evaluation Committee and the Evaluation Advisory Panel.

24. Management notes the strengthened oversight of the Director of Evaluation, including by the introduction of “matrix” management arrangements for the evaluation advisors in the regional offices. It is pleased to note that the new multi-country evaluation specialists reinforced the oversight and quality assurance of evaluations at the country-office level.

B. Resources

25. Management acknowledges the reduction of UNICEF expenditure on evaluation as a percentage of the total programme expenditure to 0.64 per cent, which is partly attributable to the lower availability of resources from the Evaluation Pooled Fund but also to the restrictions put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related reduction in travel, as well as to other efficiencies achieved due to the closer proximity of the multi-country evaluation specialists to where evaluations were implemented.

26. Management is committed to making renewed efforts to reverse the downward trend in evaluation expenditure by the end of 2021, depending on the continued impact of the pandemic on the organization's ability to complete evaluations. To maximize the use of evaluations' findings and recommendations, increased investment in broader data collection and the availability of outcome-level data for programmes is required. Management notes the efforts to increase evaluation expenditure at the regional level, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa region, which has some of the largest humanitarian programmes in UNICEF.

27. Management appreciates all efforts made in evaluation capacity-building, including through the collaboration with the United Nations Staff College and the National University of Singapore, which is aimed at UNICEF staff, government partners and other evaluation societies and organizations. The foreseen series of learning events on lessons learned by the evaluation function due to the COVID-19 pandemic are noted and management is looking forward to the application of lessons learned in future evaluations.

C. Guidance, tools and quality assurance

28. Management notes the development and improvement of tools and guidance to enhance the efficiency of the function, including in the EISI platform, which allows for better evaluation planning and implementation of management responses.

29. Management commends the continuous enhancement of tools and systems for quality assurance and the additional evaluation capacity with the multi-country evaluation specialists. It welcomes the preparation of a UNICEF quality assurance procedure for the entire evaluation function. The use of external peer reviewers to provide quality assurance for corporate evaluations is also well noted.

VI. Evaluation in support of a learning organization

A. Strengthening the implementation of management response actions

30. Management commends the high percentage of completed evaluations for which a management response was prepared and submitted in a timely manner. Management notes that more management responses could be prepared sooner after the completion of the evaluation and is committed to continue monitoring the timely preparation of management responses.

31. Management notes the high percentage of implementation of management response actions, with 86 per cent of actions stemming from evaluations from 2019 already completed or under way. Management also notes that there are regional differences in the implementation of management response actions and reinforces its efforts in monitoring implementation.

B. Further strengthening evaluation use and influence

32. Management appreciates the partnership with the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti and seven university partners, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission for the launch of the Global Development Commons, a digital evidence platform devoted to child-focused policy and programming, and for the opportunity to complement evaluations with external contributions from UNICEF partners on the ground.

VII. Corporate evaluations

33. Management is pleased that the evaluation function is on schedule to complete its plan for global evaluations in accordance with the programme of work for 2020 and including additional work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Management reaffirms its support to the function and its commitment to address agreed recommendations.

34. Management commends the evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021. The evaluation provided critical evidence for the design of the new Strategic Plan and management agreed to all seven recommendations. It also appreciates the conclusion of the UNICEF Development Effectiveness Review, 2016–2019, which synthesized findings from UNICEF evaluations from 2016 to 2019 and provided insights on UNICEF performance as well as important recommendations, such as the call for greater organizational ambition in relation to gender equity and greater engagement and consultations with community members to more effectively serve marginalized groups. Management agrees with the review's observations on the need to further improve the effectiveness of monitoring and results-based management systems, particularly at the country office level.

35. Management notes the completion of the evaluation of UNICEF work in urban settings, which is one of several corporate thematic evaluations, and which resulted in important recommendations for programming in such settings, and management agreed with all the recommendations. Management also commends the completion of the global evaluation of UNICEF water, sanitation and hygiene programming in protracted crises. The evaluation provided important lessons learned and recommended better data collection and use, strengthened local partnerships and reclaiming UNICEF thought leadership in the sector.

36. Management appreciates the ongoing efforts in participating in inter-agency evaluations and welcomes the completion of the two inter-agency humanitarian evaluations in 2020. The evaluation of the inter-agency response to Cyclone Idai was the first to assess the contribution of the new scale-up activation mechanism since its adoption by the IASC in 2018. The evaluation found that the scale-up activation, joint preparedness and strong collaboration with the Government, combined with timely joint aerial assessments, ensured that immediate humanitarian needs were anticipated correctly and contributed to the overall success of the response. The evaluation also identified several opportunities for improving future collective responses in similar contexts. The inter-agency humanitarian evaluation on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls revealed that, since 2017, the IASC had made notable progress in integrating gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls into its humanitarian responses, especially in protracted crises. The evaluation also identified several opportunities for improving future collective responses.

VIII. Conclusion

37. Management commends the progress made by the evaluation function in 2020 despite the significant challenges faced due to constrained data collection in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which were nevertheless overcome through rapid adaptation and by deploying innovative new methods. It notes the completion of a high number of high-quality evaluations and evaluative products and takes note of the need to continue promoting the use of evaluation. Management notes the reported reduction of resources in the Evaluation Pooled Fund and is committed to pursuing viable options to ensure adequate spending on evaluations over the course of the new strategic plan.

38. Management appreciates the efforts made in rapidly adapting to the situation and in responding to the call to promptly provide answers on whether the programme response to the COVID-19 pandemic was appropriate. It also appreciates the introduction of new tools and methodologies that allowed for the rapid turnaround of findings that facilitated near-real-time learning and the strengthening of organizational accountability in the response.

IX. Draft decision

The Executive Board

1. *Takes note* of the annual report for 2020 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2021/18](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2021/19](#));
2. *Also takes note* of the global evaluation of UNICEF water, sanitation and hygiene programming in protracted crises, 2014–2019, its summary ([E/ICEF/2021/20](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2021/21](#)).