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## United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

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### **Management response to the annual report for 2021 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 2021 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2022/17](#)). The management response addresses the key elements of the evaluation report, including the progress with the evaluation function during a challenging year, the coverage, the quality and utilization of evaluations in 2021, the involvement in joint and inter-agency evaluations, and evaluation expenditure.

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

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\* [E/ICEF/2022/9](#).

*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 2021 on the evaluation function in UNICEF (E/ICEF/2022/17). It comments on progress within the evaluation function in 2021 and assesses trends in performance during the 2018–2021 quadrennium. It also addresses the increased emphasis on evaluation use and organizational learning, its influence at the organizational level and its role within the United Nations development system to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

2. Management is encouraged that the evaluation function remained on track in implementing the evaluation policy (E/ICEF/2018/14), despite the challenging situation due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This situation required increased efforts in diversifying evaluative products aimed at faster turnaround for organizational learning and programmatic adjustments. Management expresses its satisfaction that the new plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025 was prepared in a participatory manner, involving colleagues at all three levels of the organization, and that the plan builds on important lessons learned during 2021 and years prior.

3. Management commends the continued high coverage of evaluations, including in humanitarian settings and in all regions, and is pleased to note that the quality of evaluations remained high in 2021. It appreciates the results of an independent quality assessment of UNICEF evaluations that rated 99 per cent of evaluations as “exceptional”, “highly satisfactory” or “satisfactory”. These results indicate that the increased capacity for technical advice, quality assurance and oversight at all levels continues to make a difference, and management acknowledges the efforts made to reinforce human resources capacity at global and decentralized levels.

4. To maximize the use of evaluation findings and recommendations, management welcomes the renewed emphasis on improving the timeliness, quality and use of management responses and is committed to working with the evaluation function to identify the ways in which management itself can help in this regard. Also, increased investment will be needed in a wider range of evaluative products and in the collection of the outcome and impact data that will allow for even greater utilization of evaluations in this United Nations Decade of Action, particularly in supporting progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

5. Management notes the increase of UNICEF evaluation expenditure, in absolute numbers, from \$50 million in 2018 to \$65.5 million in 2021, an increase of 31 per cent. Management acknowledges that evaluation spending as a percentage of the total programme budget grew to 0.91 per cent in 2021, although this is still below the target of 1 per cent. Management is committed to progressively reaching the expenditure target during the implementation of the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025.

6. Management expresses its satisfaction with the progress of the evaluation function in 2021 and reaffirms its commitment to the continued strengthening of the function.

## II. UNICEF operational context: a year of challenges and creative solutions

7. Management commends the ongoing efforts to ensure the use of robust and timely evaluations during the COVID-19 pandemic, aimed at informing programmatic action and necessary adjustments to the ongoing response while also generating lessons learned for future health emergencies. Management notes the level

of evaluation coverage of humanitarian situations and emergencies, beyond the COVID-19 response, including Level 2 and Level 3 emergency settings, such as in the Middle East and North Africa region.

8. Management appreciates the evaluation function's attention to diversifying the range of evaluative products aimed at providing timely evidence for decision-making through rapid, efficient and cost-effective methods such as real-time assessments and community rapid assessments, as well as evaluability assessments and syntheses. It notes that, owing to the pandemic, the evaluation function often required working with remote data collection from key stakeholders and rights holders and that this approach was less optimal for ensuring adequate attention to providing a voice to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, including, for example, persons with disabilities. Management encourages the evaluation function to continue identifying ever better and more creative and innovative tools, approaches and methodologies to overcome this challenge.

### **III. Performance overview of the evaluation function: ongoing progress and key lessons**

#### **A. Number of evaluation submissions and geographical coverage**

9. Management acknowledges the high number of evaluation submissions, with a total of 178 evaluative products, including 14 real-time assessments, 4 reviews and 6 evaluability assessments, substantively contributing to the evidence base to inform the country and regional COVID-19 response. Management notes the further diversification of evaluative products, such as real-time assessments and reviews, and encourages further use of innovative evaluation approaches, allowing for robust and timely decision-making, programme action and advocacy.

10. Management notes with appreciation that for all regions, the number of evaluations submitted was highest since the introduction of the Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System (GEROS). Management reaffirms its efforts to continue maximizing evaluation coverage in all regions and countries, while also ensuring even better targeting with the objective of maximizing evaluation use and impact.

#### **B. Evaluating impact and collective contributions towards the Sustainable Development Goals**

11. Management notes the number of outcome- and impact-level evaluations submitted in 2021 and welcomes the commitment of the evaluation function to placing greater emphasis on these type of evaluations in the period 2022–2025. Management recognizes, however, that higher-level outcome- and impact-focused evaluations will depend on more valid and reliable baseline and monitoring data than what are currently available, and acknowledges that more investment will be required to strengthen these fundamental building blocks for robust outcome- and impact-level evaluations. It acknowledges the commitment of the evaluation function to strengthen coordination and collaboration with the complementary functions of data collection, data analysis, monitoring, research and audit, with the aim of seizing on substantive and technical synergies, and thus strengthening future outcome- and impact-level evaluations.

12. Management commends the balance of summative and formative evaluations conducted in 2021, which contributes to both organizational accountability and learning. It encourages maintaining such balance throughout the period 2022–2025.

13. Management appreciates the continued efforts to ensure that increased coverage of disability, gender equality and humanitarian action are key focus areas for the function. It looks forward to the forthcoming synthesis of the inclusion of disability in evaluations and, as a result, the policy guidance for the function to address this important dimension.

14. Management commends consistent improvement in the integration of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the scope of analysis of evaluations. It also notes the organization's high performance rating under the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Management is committed to continue strengthening the gender perspective in evaluations, including the use of gender-responsive methodology, methods and tools, and data analysis, and in the reflection of gender analysis in the evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations.

15. Management is encouraged by the support of the UNICEF evaluation function to promote and implement joint, inter-agency and system-wide evaluations at global, regional and country levels, contributing to finding ways forward to accelerate progress in support of the Sustainable Development Goals in this Decade of Action. The number of such evaluations has increased over time, and management notes that several additional joint and inter-agency evaluations have already been included in the plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025. Echoing the Executive Board decision in its first regular session of 2022 (UNICEF/2022/EB/5), management encourages the evaluation function to continue its efforts to identify additional opportunities for joint and inter-agency evaluations with United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, as well as with non-traditional evaluation partners. Management will continue to support the timely formulation and implementation of joint management responses to joint evaluations, as well as management responses to UNICEF-specific recommendations in joint evaluations.

16. Management welcomes the ongoing capacity-building efforts among UNICEF staff, government partners and non-United Nations evaluation partners. Management encourages continued attention to national evaluation capacity development, which could also contribute to gradually providing more opportunities for joint evaluative work and country-led evaluations on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and beyond.

### **C. Evaluation quality**

17. Management commends the quality of evaluations, which remained high in 2021. It takes note of an independent quality assessment of the 154 UNICEF evaluations that rated 99 per cent of evaluations as “exceptional”, “highly satisfactory” or “satisfactory”, despite the challenges with on-site evidence-gathering due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

18. Management requests continued attention to maintaining the levels of overall evaluation quality witnessed over the past years while also considering increased application of creative and innovative approaches that enhance the cost-efficiency, timeliness and speed of turnaround without compromising the quality of evaluations and evaluative products.

19. Management appreciates the identification of evaluation components that could be strengthened even further, aimed at maximizing the use of evaluations. This includes addressing the quality and the clarity of the executive summaries with key findings and recommendations and further focusing on defining lessons learned from the evaluations. Management requests the evaluation function to continue to steadily enhance the quality of all aspects of evaluations.

## **D. Ensuring organizational learning from evaluations**

20. Management commends the continued high percentage of evaluations that have led to a corresponding management response that was submitted in a timely manner (2019–2021). It notes that more management responses could be prepared even sooner after completion of the evaluation and is committed to monitoring the preparation of management responses to ensure that these are completed in a timely manner.

21. Management is satisfied with the high percentage of implementation of management response actions, with 91 per cent of actions for evaluations from 2019 to 2021 already completed or under way. It notes that there are differences in the implementation of management response actions and requests attention to timely implementation at headquarters and decentralized levels, even though it realizes that many actions cannot be fully completed within a short time frame.

22. Management appreciates the ongoing shift towards focusing on the quality and use of evaluations to ensure that evaluations contribute to achieving maximum positive impact for children in the Decade of Action. As part of these efforts, management welcomes the forthcoming review of timeliness, quality and follow-through of evaluation management responses. It looks forward to making progress in fulfilling its responsibility to ensure that management responses are not only consistently completed in a timely fashion in compliance with the evaluation policy, but also that they are of a consistently high quality and that their implementation is monitored and reported on. This commitment extends to management responses to the recommendations of joint and inter-agency evaluations.

23. Management also notes the knowledge management efforts linked to maximizing the utilization of evaluation results, in cooperation with United Nations and other partners, through the launch of the Global Development Commons and global learning events, and appreciates the planned roll-out of a specific training course in various official languages of the United Nations. Management encourages further efforts in promoting the access and use of such tools by as many stakeholders as possible.

## **E. Financial resources and evaluation expenditure**

24. Management notes the increase in evaluation spending to 0.91 per cent of the total programme budget in 2021, compared with 0.78 per cent in 2020, and that all regions spent more than 0.50 per cent of the total programme budget on evaluation. Management notes that overall evaluation expenditure increased from \$50 million in 2018 to \$65.5 million in 2021, a 31 per cent change during the implementation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021. Management acknowledges the decline in evaluation expenditure at headquarters level compared with 2020, and is committed to allocating sufficient resources for corporate evaluations when implementing the plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025.

25. Management remains committed to adequately resourcing the evaluation function and aims to progressively achieve the 1 per cent evaluation expenditure target during the implementation of the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025.

26. Without detracting from its responsibility to ensure dedicated resources for evaluation itself, management also recognizes that there is a need to invest in a wider range of knowledge products, contributing to timely and effective decision-making and organizational learning. Management is committed to pursuing various approaches to increasing investment in ensuring the availability of outcome- and impact-level data, strengthening the monitoring function and research, allowing for

more outcome- and impact-level evaluations, achieving increased evaluability of UNICEF programmes, and contributing to strengthening national evaluation systems.

27. Management commends the progress in establishing dedicated evaluation human resources capacity at headquarters and regional levels. It also notes increased evaluation capacity at country office level, including in offices responding to Level 3 humanitarian situations and for country programmes with large programme budgets. As part of these efforts, management has already provided specifically earmarked core resources aimed at maintaining capacity for oversight, quality assurance and technical assistance at headquarters and decentralized levels during the period 2022–2025.

#### **IV. Conclusion and way forward**

28. Management recognizes the efforts made by the evaluation function to rapidly adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of innovative approaches. It also appreciates the introduction of new tools and methodologies for evaluative products that have enabled faster turnaround of findings that have facilitated near real-time learning and decision-making, and the strengthening of organizational learning and accountability throughout the response.

29. Management welcomes the greater coordination and collaboration with distinct but complementary functions within UNICEF, such as data, monitoring, research and audit. Management expects that such collaboration will allow for better and more timely evaluability at outcome and impact levels, and lead to increased emphasis on national evaluation systems-building. Likewise, management encourages continued collaboration with other United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, including on the implementation of joint, inter-agency and system-wide evaluations and on national evaluation capacity development.

30. Management appreciates the overview of important lessons learned from 2021 and previous years, and that these learnings were used for developing the plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025. It is encouraged by the continuous efforts to enhance quality assurance of evaluations and management responses and welcomes the increased focus on the utilization of evaluations. Management looks forward to the results of the forthcoming synthesis of those areas of UNICEF work that have been repeatedly targeted by evaluation recommendations but where meaningful action has been limited.

31. Management remains committed to progressively reaching the 1 per cent evaluation expenditure target during the implementation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 and reaffirms its continued efforts to define the most appropriate funding mechanisms for achieving the target.

32. In conclusion, management commends the progress made by the evaluation function in 2021, despite the significant challenges faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It notes the forward-looking efforts to further strengthen the UNICEF evaluation function, with strong emphasis on increased utilization of evaluation findings and recommendations and with more emphasis on outcome- and impact-level evaluations and joint United Nations-wide evaluations, which will allow for assessing the contributions to accelerating progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the Decade of Action.

33. Management considers itself a partner in the ongoing strengthening of the evaluation function – and the evaluation culture within UNICEF – and, towards this end, welcomes the forthcoming independent external peer review of the evaluation function, with findings and recommendations that will lead to a revision of the UNICEF evaluation policy in 2023.

## V. Draft decision

### *The Executive Board*

1. *Takes note* of the annual report for 2021 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2022/17](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2022/18](#));
  2. *Encourages* UNICEF to take the necessary steps to further strengthen the evaluation function, including by timely implementation of those elements as included in the management response;
  3. *Looks forward* to the updated UNICEF evaluation policy and the process leading towards the adoption of this updated policy.
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