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Evaluation of the UNICEF role as cluster lead/ co-lead agency

Summary[**]

Summary

As defined in the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, the UNICEF cluster lead agency role is to "support the leadership and coordination of humanitarian response, along with national and local stakeholders, and in compliance with humanitarian principles". The present evaluation was commissioned in 2020 to shed light on the challenges and opportunities that the organization faces in carrying out its cluster lead agency responsibilities, to assess progress over the past seven years and to inform the future direction of the cluster lead agency role in UNICEF. The first evaluation of the UNICEF cluster lead agency role was conducted in 2013, and the present evaluation serves as a follow-up exercise to that assessment.

The evaluation suggests that UNICEF is generally delivering on the main coordination responsibilities associated with the cluster lead agency role at both the global and country levels. While the evaluation presents a few promising examples of leadership, it also notes that the leadership responsibilities of the cluster lead agency role are less well defined and fulfilled.

The evaluation points out that that country-based clusters have become "conduits for process" and overwhelmed by cumbersome tasks that jeopardize strategic thinking and vision. It sheds light on the generally insufficient support that UNICEF grants to cluster coordinators, and flags the lack of clear direction given by UNICEF at country level on how to implement commitments such as accountability to affected populations, localization, the humanitarian-development nexus and the centrality of protection.

Importantly, some of the evaluation's findings point to long-standing issues

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[**] The evaluation report summary is being circulated in all official languages. The full report is available in English from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website (see annex).
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raised more than seven years ago by the original CLARE I evaluation. These issues now warrant urgent attention if UNICEF is committed to fulfilling its CLA role to the fullest. The evaluation generated 3 overarching recommendations and 12 sub-recommendations to address the underlying issues and challenges identified in the report.

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

I.   Introduction

1.   The cluster approach was conceived within the broader framework of the humanitarian reform initiative undertaken by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in 2005. By strengthening partnerships in several key sectors of humanitarian response – or "clusters", as they became known – the approach aimed to improve predictability, response capacity, coordination and accountability in humanitarian response. Leadership of each cluster was formalized and taken on by particular agencies/organizations. UNICEF was designated as cluster lead agency (CLA) of the nutrition cluster and the water, sanitation and hygiene cluster, and as co-lead agency, together with Save the Children International, of the education cluster, as well as focal point agency for the child protection area of responsibility under the protection cluster.

2.   A first global evaluation of the UNICEF CLA role in humanitarian action (CLARE I) was undertaken in 2013. The evaluation concluded that overall, UNICEF had invested significantly in implementing its CLA role, with positive results. Progress has been highlighted in several other evaluations, reviews and evaluative exercises undertaken since then.

3.   Since CLARE I, the humanitarian landscape has undergone fundamental shifts, and the cluster approach has continued to mature and evolve in response to these trends. At the time that CLARE I was under way, the transformative agenda – a set of actions agreed to by IASC principals in December 2011 – was in the early stages of being operationalized; as such, the report contained one scant reference to the "transformative agenda integrated programme cycle" and noted that the tools had yet to be tested. In the years that followed, however, the humanitarian programme cycle methodology began to dominate the work of country-based clusters. A second set of reforms came in the wake of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and the resulting Grand Bargain. This process saw the adoption of several commitments, especially in the areas of accountability to affected populations, cash as the preferred modality for delivery of assistance to people in need, diversity, equity and inclusion, the central role of local actors, and the linkage between relief and development (and peace). While some of these commitments were not strictly new, prior to 2016 they had often been vaguely articulated and accountabilities for implementing them were unclear. In the wake of the Grand Bargain, operationalizing many of them became the responsibility of the clusters, adding to the volume and complexity of their work.

4.   In 2013, CLARE I cautioned against what it saw as cluster "scope creep". It argued that the proliferation of contexts in which the cluster approach was being implemented, compounded by the extended activation timelines of clusters, limited the ability of UNICEF to carry out its CLA role, resulting in efforts and resources being spread more thinly. Since then, the organization's humanitarian funding requirements have increased significantly: between 2014 and 2018, funding requirements through the Humanitarian Action for Children appeal grew by more than 70 per cent. In 2020, the humanitarian funding requirement increased to $6.32 billion, representing the largest-ever funding request for humanitarian action by UNICEF. Still, resources remain thin in relation to needs.

5.   The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic compounded this situation, arriving at a time when humanitarian needs were already high. The longer-term impacts of COVID-19 might be even greater in terms of food security, educational opportunities and livelihoods. At the same time, the economic impacts of the pandemic might result in a significant decline in humanitarian funding; as a result, the gap between needs and available humanitarian response capacity risks expanding further. This gap will undoubtedly have implications for the clusters and how they are led. The UNICEF Evaluation Office commissioned the present CLARE evaluation –

CLARE II – as COVID-19 was just starting to affect lives across the globe. A "COVID-19 lens" was incorporated into the design of the evaluation to ensure that its purpose and objectives remained relevant and could generate useful evidence in both the current context and the post-COVID-19 world.

II. Evaluation approach

6. The evaluation reviewed UNICEF experience as CLA since 2013, assessing progress and identifying remaining gaps since the CLARE I evaluation, and making recommendations geared towards helping UNICEF improve its performance as CLA going forward.

7. The evaluation examined the four UNICEF led/co-led clusters – namely, nutrition; education; water, sanitation and hygiene; and the child protection area of responsibility – with equal emphasis. It investigated how UNICEF carries out its CLA role at the global, regional and country levels. At the global level, the evaluation assessed the organization's role in leading the global clusters in setting policy, standards and guidelines; building response capacity; providing operational support; and ensuring synergies with other (global) clusters and inter-cluster collaboration through the global cluster coordination group. At the country level, and with a particular focus on eight country contexts (Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Sudan and the Sudan), the evaluation considered how UNICEF has carried out its CLA responsibilities to support service delivery; inform the humanitarian coordinator/humanitarian country team strategic decision-making; plan and implement cluster strategies; monitor and evaluate performance; and undertake contingency planning and robust advocacy.

8. A description of the UNICEF CLA role appears in the organization's Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action: "support the leadership and coordination of humanitarian response, along with national and local stakeholders, and in compliance with humanitarian principles".

9. In line with this definition, the evaluation team separated CLA responsibilities into two broad but interlinked categories: coordination and leadership. Figure I provides a visual representation of the logic model used for the analysis.

10. The model presents the main causal pathways underlying UNICEF engagement as CLA, indicated by green arrows. The light grey field illustrates the scope of the evaluation, which covered the overarching coordination and leadership role that UNICEF plays as CLA, rather than the extent to which UNICEF-led cluster members have more broadly carried out the programmatic and operational responsibilities within their respective sectors. The summative angle assessed the way in which UNICEF has carried out its CLA role in practice and the progress made since 2013. Progress was assessed against the tenets of the cluster approach, namely, predictability, accountability and partnership. In addition, the commitments made at the time of the World Humanitarian Summit and/or in line with the Grand Bargain were taken into account, as were the CLARE I recommendations. Given that the CLA role includes responsibilities specifically related to leadership as well as coordination, and with a view to formatively drawing lessons for UNICEF to be better equipped to exercise systematic, high-quality cluster (co-)leadership, the evaluation also considered a set of benchmarks specifically linked to leadership styles.

11. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, gathering data from global, regional and country levels. Due to movement restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the evaluation team used virtual data-collection tools including remote semi-structured interviews with key informants, an online survey among UNICEF cluster partners and cluster coordinators, and a focus group discussion with members

of the evaluation reference group to validate specific findings. Primary data collected through these methods were triangulated by the findings from a systematic document review and subsequent analysis.

Figure I
Logic model for the present evaluation
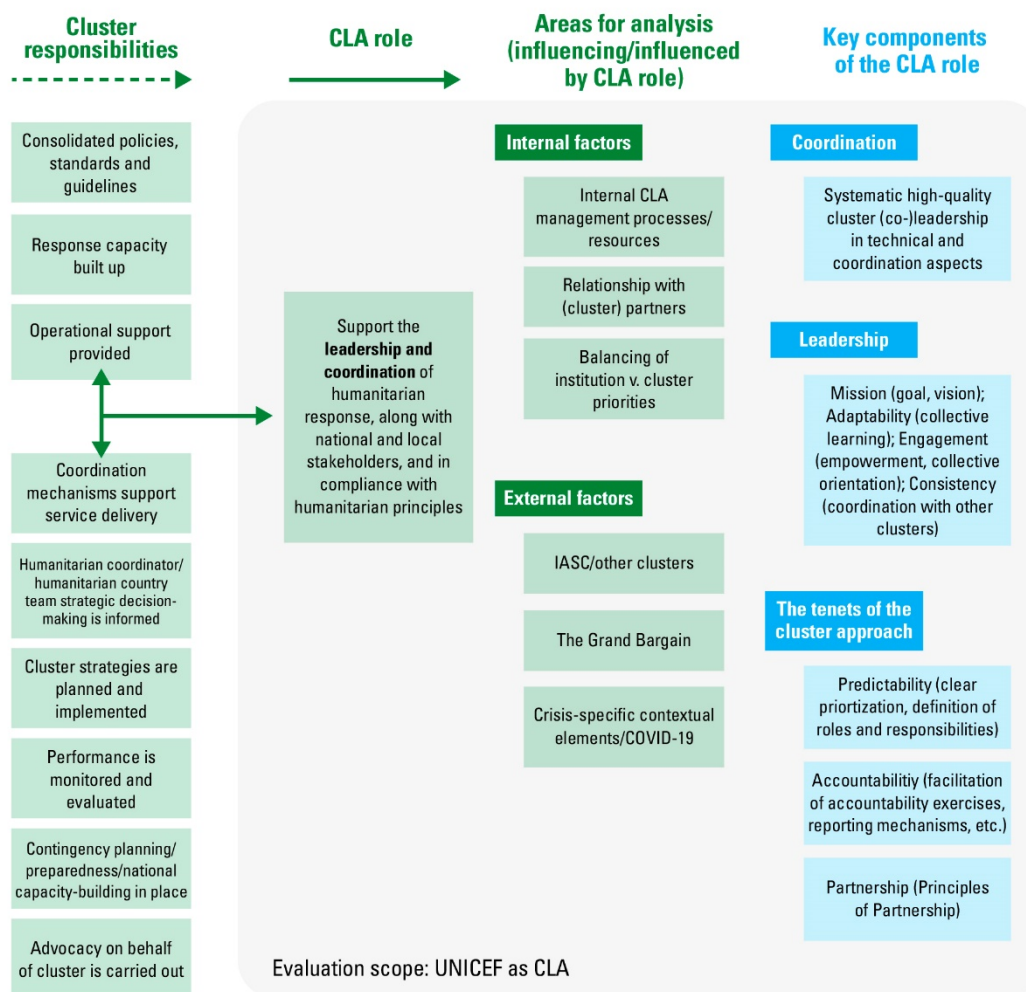
III.   **Findings of the evaluation**

A.   **Global coordination responsibilities**

12.   UNICEF fulfils three main roles in executing its global coordination responsibilities: standards- and policy-setting, building response capacity, and operational support. The response of the clusters to the COVID-19 pandemic is an illustrative example: new policies and technical guidance have been issued, training materials have been developed or adapted and extensive operational support has been provided, especially through cluster help desk functions and working groups, including in countries where the cluster approach has not been activated.

1.   **Technical and operational support**

13.   Day-to-day operational support and technical guidance appears to be the area where the global clusters have matured most since 2013. They provide extensive surge

capacity through rapid field support teams, develop relevant guidance materials and technical advice, make training modules and events available and put standardized information tools and management in place. Their help desk function is particularly appreciated by the country-based clusters.

14. The standards and policy function of the CLA also extends to strategy and vision on longer-term issues. In this regard, a document analysis by the evaluation team revealed few documents linked to the strategic, institutional approach of UNICEF regarding its CLA role. Among the more than 150 documents reviewed, only about one third mention the CLA role at all, and only one fifth concretely explain what the role entails, beyond one or two sentences. Where such documentation does exist, it largely reflects and operationalizes IASC cluster standards and policies. A significant gap exists, however, in IASC documents and policies that clarify the CLA role in terms of leadership. The 2006 IASC cluster guidance, which is the only document that covers the global CLA role, is significantly outdated. Already in 2013, CLARE I had signalled that the IASC cluster guidance was becoming outdated in several ways, such as in monitoring the global clusters' performance. There is no evidence as of yet that this issue has been taken up since 2013, and IASC guidance on clusters has remained largely focused on the country level. Global-level analyses and practical advice on what to do in the face of new trends and challenges seem necessary.

15. The evaluation noted a lack of clarity – as well as some disagreement – on whether the primary focus of the global clusters should be on setting direction and strategic priorities or on practical day-to-day coordination services and technical support to the in-country clusters. There is little guidance available for cluster coordinators on how to address the balance between the two fields, while key informants suggested that it is dependent on the individual who is fulfilling the role. At all levels and irrespective of cluster, informants mentioned that the process, direction and focus of cluster coordination depends on the individual driving it rather than on an agreed and consistent institutional approach. The change in focus of some of the global clusters from operations to policy (or vice versa) came with the change of the cluster coordinator and appears to be related to their background, interest or understanding of the role of clusters. In summary, UNICEF as CLA has not given clear direction as to what the focus of the clusters should be.

B.   In-country coordination responsibilities

1.   Additional workload and clusters as "conduits for process"

16. UNICEF has made significant progress in fulfilling its country-level cluster coordination responsibilities. Survey results generally show strong appreciation for how the organization works as CLA in this regard, and stakeholders interviewed compared UNICEF favourably to other CLAs, pointing in particular to efforts by the organization to ensure that it has dedicated capacity in place for the coordination role.

17. Country-based clusters have been given progressively more responsibilities since the early days of the cluster approach. They have become the conduits for processes such as developing the humanitarian response plan, monitoring and managing the humanitarian programme cycle for the sector and preparing pooled funding allocations. There are also times when clusters have been asked to roll out UNICEF programmatic initiatives, such as the integration of cash transfers into the UNICEF response. The evaluation determined that UNICEF has performed well with regard to coordination; considering the increasing complexity of the contexts in which the clusters are activated and the proliferation of tasks, this is no small achievement.

18. At the same time, cluster coordinators signalled frustration with the proliferation of tasks and the extent to which this increase in activity comes at the expense of a

quality output. Many cluster coordinators registered their dissatisfaction at the heavy workload covering mundane coordination matters, which they noted does not leave space for more strategic thinking or reflection on the cluster's state of affairs. Reportedly, much of the cluster coordinators' and information managers' time is taken by responding to the expectations of the system, such as populating information templates, collecting data for dashboards or responding to other requests for information. Cluster partners would, however, appreciate more analysis on achievements and gaps. Overall, the evidence suggests that UNICEF as CLA does not prioritize a targeted approach to data, information or analysis for strategic decision-making. This would entail determining what type of data are relevant and necessary, for whom and when, while also questioning whether the emphasis on data and processing high volumes of information might, in fact, come at the expense of analysis and use.

2. Relationships with partners

19. The evaluation team noted that UNICEF efforts to mobilize resources for the collective response through the clusters were generally appreciated by stakeholders. However, there was a high degree of variation in views about whether UNICEF is primarily concerned about its own funding or whether it works to mobilize resources for the collective. While it was not possible for the evaluation team to reach its own conclusions in this regard, given the collective nature of the clusters, the perception of partners is important. Further reflection on why these perceptions exist, and what UNICEF can do to address negative perceptions of its resource mobilization role, would be worthwhile.

20. The role of the clusters in mobilizing and preparing allocation decisions of funding for each sector response has increased significantly over the years. Clusters were not initially intended to play a central role in funding allocation processes, and this additional function has benefits and drawbacks. Putting the clusters in charge of preparing funding allocation decisions would in principle strengthen their collective character, provided that these decisions are transparent and involve the entire cluster. At the same time, when those deciding on the funding are also those in a position to receive it, there is a clear conflict of interest.

21. The strongest divergence of views was encountered with regard to whether the individual agency or the collective comes first in the mindset of the CLA – that is, the extent to which UNICEF is viewed as an honest broker in its CLA role. At first glance, answers to the two survey questions touching on how UNICEF balances its agency interests with those of the collective appear positive. However, considerable variation was seen from one context to the next, and this question also registered one of the highest levels of disagreement, suggesting that it was a relatively polarizing question. The organization's desire for profile was mentioned repeatedly in interviews with cluster partners, which noted that UNICEF seeks to use the cluster to promote or implement its own agenda.

22. Another concern raised by some key informants related to the power dynamics that can exist between a large international organization such as UNICEF and national and local non-governmental organizations, which may have negative consequences for the quality of partnership. Some non-governmental organizations, for instance, might feel less free to engage in the cluster out of fear of funding-related repercussions. There were also mixed reviews on how the Principles of Partnership – namely, equality, transparency, results-oriented approach, responsibility and complementarity – were put into practice by the clusters in different countries.

3. Staffing

23. Critical to cluster coordination at the country level is the continued staffing of cluster leadership positions, including the coordinator and information manager, which has become the standard configuration of cluster leadership. In 2013, the CLARE I evaluation noted that "double-hatting" – the practice of performing the CLA role in addition to undertaking UNICEF-specific programmatic and operational responsibilities – was prevalent, with only 28 per cent of staff working full time on cluster activities. UNICEF appears to have made a significant effort to improve this situation. In 2020, 61 per cent of cluster coordinators and 39 per cent of information management officers at the national level in UNICEF led/co-led clusters were in dedicated, full-time positions. Still, while UNICEF can be commended for the improvement, it does not reach the ideal 100 per cent of dedicated fixed-term staff, and gaps in these positions at the country level still happen frequently, sometimes for prolonged periods.

24. Linked to this staffing gap is the perception that cluster coordinator positions are not valued within UNICEF in the same way as other positions. The evaluation team encountered this sentiment frequently: nearly half of the cluster coordinators who responded to the survey indicated that their needs were only partially met by the organization, or not at all. Analysis from the key informant interviews indicates that human resources concerns – including double-hatting, high turnover and vacancies, as well as a lack of career paths for cluster coordinator positions – and a lack of institutional support from UNICEF as an agency for the CLA role were the two most frequently mentioned negative aspects of how UNICEF carries out its CLA role.

25. Figure II was developed based on the systematic coding of all key informant interviews and shows the cross-coding of various factors mentioned, and where interviewees have signalled these factors as negatively or positively influencing how UNICEF is carrying out its CLA role.

Figure II
Overview of perceived obstacles and enablers for UNICEF as cluster lead agency

Key informant interviewees
Global, regional and country levels

The larger the red dot, the more interviewees indicated this area as an obstacle/enabler for UNICEF to carry out its CLA role.

	Obstacle for UNICEF as CLA	Enabler for UNICEF as CLA
Personalities	●	●
Competition	●	
Comes down to incentives	·	
Context/momentum	·	·
Funding	●	●
Human resources concerns	●	·
Mismatch/asymmetry/push-pull	●	
Power/role (im)balances	●	·
Division of labour/roles (including shared workloads)	·	●
Communication	·	·
Pressure on coordinators/information management officers	·	·
For own agency, not collective	●	
Double-hatting	●	
Trust	·	·
Institutional support/internal UNICEF	●	·
Reporting lines	·	·
Relationship with Government	●	●
Cluster system/relationships	●	·
Lack of overall clarity/vision	●	

C. Leadership

1. Leadership commitments

26. The cluster is not a mechanism that can be managed in a top-down, command-and-control manner; rather, decision-making happens through consultation and participation. Leadership is critical in providing ideas and plans, engaging partners in collective exchanges and proposing meaningful shared or common directions. In this vein, there is overwhelming evidence that UNICEF has not given the leadership aspects of the CLA role due consideration.

27.   Two key descriptive questions served as the foundation for this line of inquiry. The first question is: "Who in UNICEF actually fulfils the CLA role: the cluster coordinator, global cluster coordination unit, the country representative, the regional director, the Office of Emergency Programmes, Programme Division, or all of the above?" The second question is: "Assuming that all six parts have a CLA (leadership) role, how do their different CLA roles and responsibilities relate?"

28.   Figure III provides a visual representation of the six actors within UNICEF that share the leadership responsibility for the CLA. These are as follows:

(a)   Cluster coordinators have become the personification of the CLA. Cluster coordinators, whether at global or country levels, recognized and explained the criticality of leadership during the interviews. Several of them noted that they have to ensure an open atmosphere that encourages an inclusive and participatory approach and characterized their role as being one of facilitation. Some also noted that they rely on the cluster's strategic advisory group as the mechanism for consultation and to exchange ideas. However, cluster coordinators also noted that their agency's focus is primarily internal and pointed to a general lack of interest from UNICEF in their cluster coordination and leadership responsibilities.

(b)   The global cluster coordination unit holds a key role when it comes to leadership, as it can potentially leverage the UNICEF CLA role in relation to the four clusters. The unit is responsible for connecting the cluster coordinators with everything that goes on in the Office of Emergency Programmes and other divisions in UNICEF, and vice versa. It is the bridge between the interest of UNICEF as an agency and what it does as CLA for the collective at the global level. In addition, having a coordination role for three clusters and an area of responsibility also implies that it could play a key role in working on "intersectorality".

(c)   At the country level, the UNICEF representative holds a key role with regard to the clusters. The representative decides on the staffing of the cluster coordination positions, for example, including where the financial resources for these roles should come from. Likewise, the representative has line management responsibility over the cluster coordinators, although the representative can decide to delegate this role.

(d)   The role of regional offices with regard to the clusters is not immediately obvious, an issue also signalled in CLARE I. While the clusters exist globally and at the country level, there are no regional clusters. The regional director, however, holds an important position in ensuring that UNICEF representatives report on their responsibilities in overseeing the CLA role at the country level. In addition, UNICEF staff present at the regional level are asked to provide support either on technical issues or in terms of filling in or supporting staff positions in the clusters. Regional offices also approve staffing in country offices, which includes cluster staff.

(e)   The Office of Emergency Programmes has line management responsibilities for the global cluster coordination unit at the global level. The Office also represents UNICEF in the IASC and Emergency Directors Group, which enables it to bring any cluster-related policy or operational issues to these bodies.

(f)   Lastly, technical or "programme" staff also have a special role when it comes to the organization's CLA function. All UNICEF technical sections have humanitarian experts participating in each of the four clusters at the global and country levels. They represent UNICEF, just as other cluster participants represent their agencies, but because of the CLA role and the vast technical capacity and expertise of UNICEF, they have a significant leadership role content-wise.

29.   All of the above-mentioned UNICEF actors have a part to play in providing leadership as CLA. At this time, too much emphasis is placed on cluster coordinators, who do not receive sufficient institutional support from other parts of UNICEF. The

CLARE I evaluation had noted the existence of different reporting structures in different country offices, and that direct reporting lines to a representative can help to ensure that cluster issues are clearly communicated to a humanitarian country team. Alternative reporting lines remain an important obstacle to UNICEF successfully carrying out its CLA role.

30.   This lack of support is not necessarily a matter of unwillingness, but the result of an agency that has yet to recognize that its CLA role might have a greater impact in terms of achieving its humanitarian mission than the narrow pursuits of its individual agency mindset and focus.

Figure III
Shared leadership responsibility of the cluster lead agency role
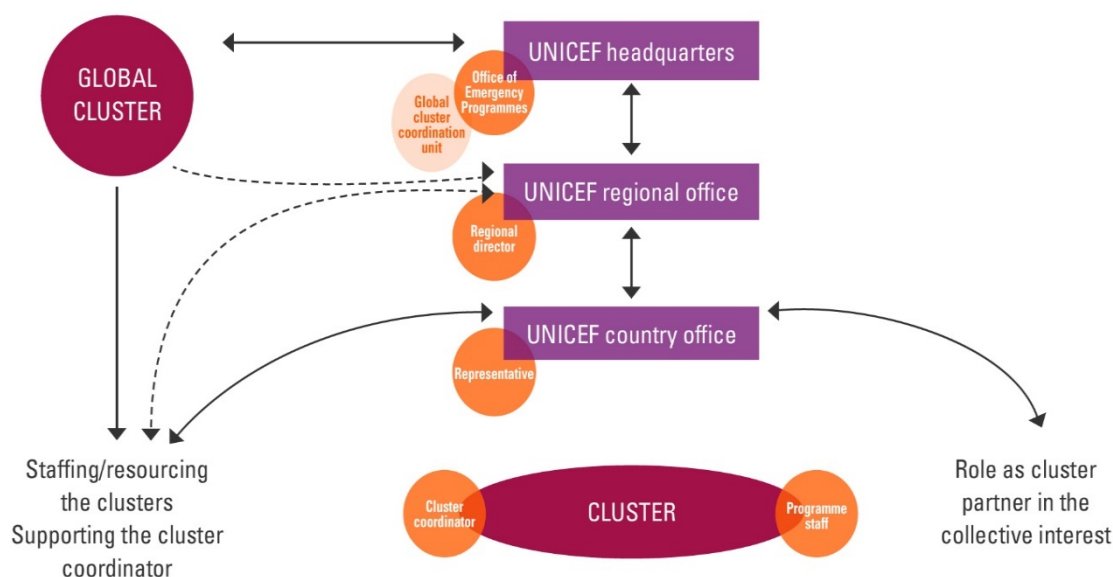
2.   Strategic approach

31.   Strategy formulation and a clear prioritization of tasks are essential components of leadership. They are also inherently challenging in a collective inter-agency environment. Cluster partners generally appreciated UNICEF efforts in this regard.

32.   At the global level, all clusters have a strategy and a strategic advisory group in place. The cluster strategic advisory groups are the main mechanism to discuss and agree on strategy, workplans and other priorities. Key informants noted that for a number of the strategic advisory groups, the roles have become clearer and more structured in recent years. Others were less positive, however. Some questioned the size of their groups or noted that their groups did not cover strategic issues and were instead working on day-to-day affairs.

33.   The evaluation team noted that several of the global clusters' strategies contained a multitude of priorities and looked more like action plans or workplans than strategies that lay out a vision and objectives. This might be linked to the planning horizon of the clusters, which itself is often linked to short-term funding or the short humanitarian planning cycle in general. Other key informants linked it to the heavy workload, noting that they do not have the time to take a step back and look at longer-term strategic objectives. It could be argued that part of demonstrating leadership is creating space for strategic discussions and ways of working.

Stakeholders reported being able to take very little time to reflect within clusters on questions such as how the cluster works best together, how to leverage the complementarity of agencies' comparative advantages or, importantly, how the CLA can best serve the entire cluster.

3. Co-leadership and collective leadership

34. The evaluation sees leadership as a collective effort in which each cluster partner has a responsibility to contribute proposals and suggest directions that work towards common objectives. If practised well, co-leadership can be seen as an optimal arrangement that combines the concepts of partnership and collective leadership.

35. Generally, UNICEF appears to be open to co-leadership arrangements at the country level. Experience, however, was mixed. There was wide variation in how shared leadership arrangements at the country level were described, including: co-chairs/leads; chair and co-chair; co-coordinators; co-facilitators; and several other terms. The choice of terminology depends in part on how co-leadership is understood – that is, whether it is a matter of delegating tasks from the lead to the "co-lead" or a matter of sharing, in which there are two co-leads. The first arrangement presumes a degree of authority of the lead over the co-lead, while the latter implies a relationship of parity between equal partners. The evaluation collected significant evidence to suggest that coordination arrangements referred to as co-leadership barely fit this concept for the simple reason that they are merely a practical division of (coordination) tasks without much, if any, leadership vision or roles involved.

36. Collective leadership fits closely with partnership. The way in which UNICEF as CLA approaches partnership was generally appreciated by key informants and appears strong to the evaluation team. In other words, cluster practice may amount to collective leadership without naming it as such. The evaluation found evidence of collective leadership in the clusters, especially at the global level, and occasionally at the country level. On the ground, key informants pointed to some good examples of a collective atmosphere, noting, for example, that cluster partners are given opportunities to participate, not only in terms of presenting their activities, but also in terms of providing substantive contributions to ideas and strategies. In answer to the question of whether UNICEF as CLA is promoting innovative approaches or initiatives, respondents frequently highlighted that the coordinator encourages partners to contribute thoughts and ideas. It is noteworthy, however, that a large majority of respondents connected the collective leadership of the clusters to the initiative of individuals rather than to formal systems for collective leadership.

4. Accountability and provider of last resort

37. The 2006 IASC guidelines on the cluster approach first laid out the expectations and accountabilities for cluster leads. While the generic terms of reference for cluster leads at the country level and the main areas of responsibilities laid out in those guidelines remain largely the same, other documents outlining roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for cluster lead agencies and cluster coordinators have been issued. The result is a messy patchwork of cluster "doctrine" that makes it difficult to clearly articulate accountabilities for CLAs. This lack of clarity is compounded by the conflation between the personal and the institutional: cluster partners often see cluster leadership personified in the cluster coordinator as opposed to the CLA. In a similar vein, it is not always clear where the accountabilities of the CLA leave off and those of the wider cluster, or the response as a whole, begin. Both globally and at country level, accountability can remain elusive if underperformance and cluster leadership are not connected. The cluster coordination performance monitoring tool could be a useful proxy indicator of the CLA's accountability, but it would need to allow for

qualitative analysis of what works and what does not. Instead, it is currently highly process-oriented, looking at a plethora of cluster activities in a "box ticking" manner.

38.   Linked to the issue of CLA accountability is the responsibility of the CLA to step in as a "provider of last resort". This concept was introduced in 2006; shortly thereafter, in 2008, IASC issued operational guidelines that qualified and "clarified" the concept. The CLARE I evaluation noted that cluster staff and partners had a widely differing understanding of what the concept entails, and the situation has essentially not evolved since 2013. Not surprisingly, therefore, the present evaluation found that the concept remains inconsistently addressed by UNICEF. This needs to be rectified. The concept itself is fraught with issues, making a common and consistent understanding of it extremely complicated. UNICEF would be well advised to seek to clarify the principle and cluster responsibility through IASC.

5.   Policy commitments

39.   Leadership is in part about charting ways forward, setting directions and proposing new ways of working given changes in context or new policy trends and commitments. The present evaluation looked at four humanitarian policy commitments that were deemed to be particularly relevant in this regard, namely, the centrality of protection, accountability to affected populations, the humanitarian-development nexus and the localization of aid. The evaluation encountered mixed perspectives regarding the extent to which these four areas have been promoted by UNICEF within clusters. Some interviewees felt that all four issues are well promoted within the cluster, thanks to the cluster lead, while others said that the issues were a mere afterthought in cluster discussions, if raised at all. This variation suggests a lack of consistent guidance from UNICEF on how to approach such commitments through the cluster. In other words, while there is guidance from the four global clusters supporting the four policy issues, there is generally limited direction from UNICEF as CLA, including from representatives, for the clusters to implement and prioritize these four policy commitments.

IV.   Conclusions

40.   **Conclusion 1:** UNICEF has generally delivered on the coordination responsibilies of its CLA role.

41.   Using the benchmarks of the existing cluster approach policy, UNICEF has generally fulfilled the main coordination responsibilities associated with its CLA role. The organization has to some extent worked to ensure that cluster coordinators are in place globally and, with some exceptions, at country level. However, these positions are not always staffed in a timely and consistent manner. Global clusters are often called on to fill staff gaps. UNICEF has not made a concerted effort to ensure that coordination and information management staff are readily available and supported in their career paths.

42.   The organization has generally worked to ensure that the clusters have dedicated capacity and tools for information management; collectively produce and circulate policies and other guidance materials; provide technical support to cluster participants; and provide the venue for inter-agency sectoral consultations and partnerships. However, the clusters have taken on more responsibilities and tasks than initially foreseen. In addition to creating a number of challenges, this "mission creep" has resulted in a rather mechanical way of working in which processes and tools, such as templates, dashboards and humanitarian planning cycles, dominate cluster work, sometimes at the expense of more strategic work.

43. **Conclusion 2:** The CLA role is not adequately valued or prioritized across the organization, particularly at the level of senior management, and CLA responsibilities are not sufficiently shared across UNICEF entities. Cluster coordinator positions are not sufficiently incentivized within UNICEF.

44. There are at least six different entities within UNICEF that have a responsibility in fulfilling the CLA role. In practice, however, much of the CLA burden falls only on two of these entities: cluster coordinators (at global and country levels) and the global cluster coordination unit. CLA responsibilities are left to the working level, with insufficient support from across the organization, resulting in inconsistency and unevenness in how the role is fulfilled, particularly at the country level.

45. The evidence encountered by the evaluation team seems to suggest that reasons for this inadequate prioritization include the mindsets, culture and systems of UNICEF. The organization's incentives and appraisal systems reward staff for their achievements for the agency, instead of for the collective through clusters. While many UNICEF cluster coordinators have done a remarkable job, they often feel isolated in their roles. Clusters provide a unique "selling" opportunity for UNICEF, which is too often overlooked or neglected by senior leadership or the broader organization. The evaluation suggests that UNICEF has not yet recognized that its work for children in humanitarian settings is more effective when carried out on behalf of, and together with, the collective of agencies.

46. **Conclusion 3:** UNICEF has not equally performed on the leadership responsibilities of its CLA role. Many co-leadership arrangements are not yet delivering on their potential.

47. The leadership role of the CLA should include:

    (a) Building a consensus among cluster partners around a shared vision and ways to collectively realize this vision;

    (b) Bringing the clusters and areas of responsibility closer together by working towards intersectoral connections and synergies;

    (c) Sharing UNICEF experiences and views on the cluster approach in humanitarian country teams and with IASC and the wider humanitarian community.

48. While the evaluation noted a number of positive examples in this regard, UNICEF has generally underperformed in providing leadership across these three areas. A particular gap is in setting vision and strategy, a key leadership function. Day-to-day coordination duties, many of which are dictated by inter-agency processes and have expanded since the cluster approach began, dominate the workload, often at the expense of formulating meaningful strategies. Leadership also extends to deciding on the importance or relevance of certain tasks, and UNICEF and its cluster coordinators should not hesitate to prioritize in this way.

49. Among the positive examples encountered by the evaluation was the creation by the global nutrition cluster, under UNICEF leadership, of the cluster coordination competency framework, which was subsequently disseminated by the global cluster coordination unit. The global water, sanitation and hygiene cluster was also singled out in interviews as promoting a welcome approach to collective leadership.

50. The evaluation found that co-leadership arrangements in particular were not always delivering on their potential for collective leadership and meaningful partnership. Too often, co-leadership arrangements have become practical divisions of labour, which do not capitalize on the complementary strengths of the co-leaders, resulting in missed opportunities. A wide variety of terms are used to describe co-leadership arrangements, which creates confusion with regard to respective roles and

responsibilities of the co-leads, especially when these arrangements are not put on paper.

51.   **Conclusion 4:** The underlying tenets of the cluster approach – accountability, predictability and partnership – are inconsistently understood and applied.

52.   The principle of accountability, in particular, is fraught with issues, best illustrated in the concept of provider of last resort, which is understood and applied in many different ways within UNICEF. In some situations, it has been applied as the provider of "first resort", with UNICEF taking on a large proportion of the delivery in a certain sector, while in others it has not been applied or its application has been opaque. Without the relevant bodies, such as the humanitarian country team or IASC, asking for transparency and explanations, accountability remains elusive.

53.   Predictability in the cluster approach has two aspects:

      (a)   In the use by the CLA of similar tools and processes in the clusters everywhere, which was generally found to be the case;

      (b)   Through the continued staffing of (dedicated) cluster coordinators and information managers. Gaps remain in this second aspect, sometimes for prolonged periods of time. UNICEF standby partners may fill these gaps on a short-term basis, but this is not a sustainable solution.

54.   Partnership is an area where UNICEF as CLA is perceived by stakeholders to be doing quite well. However, the organization has no systematic approach to partnership. Implementation of IASC guidance in this regard is inconsistent. In key informant interviews, the clusters were commended for their inclusiveness in terms of ensuring partnerships with local, national and international organizations. Cluster coordinators are seen as promoting and strengthening partnerships. As a result of the policy on localization and a commitment to strengthening partnerships, the number of national and local non-governmental organizations participating in the clusters has increased in many countries, especially in education and the child protection area of responsibility. However, this partnership approach is often due to the individual efforts of cluster coordinators rather than the result of an institutional approach by the organization.

55.   A particular challenge highlighted in interviews was that UNICEF is perceived as not understanding the power dynamics that arise from a "donor" relationship when non-governmental organizations implement programmes with UNICEF funds. This has an impact in terms of how freely these organizations can engage in the cluster out of fear of funding-related repercussions.

56.   **Conclusion 5:** As the agency leading/co-leading the greatest number of global clusters/areas of responsibility, UNICEF has not played a sufficiently proactive role in encouraging IASC and the wider humanitarian community to review global policy and guidance on the cluster approach.

57.   The CLA role also requires an approach that not only follows existing inter-agency guidance, but also actively initiates and contributes to ongoing strategic discussions within IASC about the extent to which the cluster approach is still fit for purpose and what modifications might be needed to improve performance. The IASC transformative agenda (2012) stated that the "clusters will be stripped back to become lean, effective and efficient coordination mechanisms focusing on delivery of results, rather than process". Nearly ten years later, it looks as if the clusters have gone some way in this direction, but they are far from being "lean" or streamlined. Process still dominates the work of the clusters, and as the United Nations agency with the most cluster lead responsibilities, UNICEF should have signalled this.

58.   In its new Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, UNICEF notes that the organization's focus will be shifted "beyond what the organization can do alone, towards using its mandate to mobilize other actors to maximize collective impact". The findings of this evaluation reaffirm the importance of this step, but also show that UNICEF still has some way to go towards achieving it. While parts of the agency, especially cluster coordinators, have adopted it, the culture of collective working is not yet institution-wide, and many systems and processes are still structured in terms of "UNICEF first". After more than 15 years of leading or co-leading three global clusters and the child protection area of responsibility, UNICEF has accrued a wealth of experience and lessons learned, and impressive progress has been made. The challenge going forward will be to further institutionalize the cluster lead agency role such that it is viewed as a core part of UNICEF business, in the spirit of maximizing collective results for children.

V.   Recommendations

59.   The evaluation generated 3 overarching recommendations and 12 sub-recommendations designed to address the underlying issues and challenges identified in the report. Since some of the findings of this evaluation point to long-standing issues raised more than seven years ago by the CLARE I evaluation, the following recommendations also represent a second opportunity for UNICEF to tackle some of the outstanding obstacles that have hampered performance of the CLA role to the fullest.

60.   **Recommendation 1:** Embrace, promote and operationalize the understanding that UNICEF work for children in humanitarian settings is even more effective when carried out on behalf of, and together with, the collective of actors. A change in approach is required for the organization to focus beyond what UNICEF can do alone, fostering a renewed recognition of the CLA role not as a mere "add-on" but as a core imperative of the UNICEF mandate and an international commitment. In particular, UNICEF should:

(a)   Ensure that key CLA functions, including cluster leadership positions such as cluster coordinators and information management officers, are covered from the agency's core budget.

(b)   Clarify how UNICEF prioritizes its CLA role and responsibilities amid the myriad other priorities it has set, while further supporting the notion of "intersectorality" of the humanitarian response. The global cluster coordination unit should continue to build on the role it has established over the years with a view to further promoting both the organization's CLA role and the notion of "intersectorality" of the humanitarian response.

(c)   Provide full transparency to cluster partners about UNICEF efforts and intentions around fundraising and funding for the clusters when it has the dual role of being the CLA as well as providing financial resources as UNICEF to cluster partners, to avoid – or better manage – perceived conflicts of interest. Further, perceptions of uneven power dynamics should be addressed by reducing/limiting the frequency of double-hatted cluster coordinator positions as well as clarifying and managing expectations of UNICEF programme specialists with regard to the role of cluster coordinators in clusters.

(d)   Promote strategic advisory groups as platforms of collective leadership where issues such as cluster vision and objectives are openly discussed, defined and prioritized by cluster partners. The global cluster coordination unit should regularly promote and disseminate the good practices that exist in relation to the effective functioning of strategic advisory groups.

(e)   Provide clear direction on how the clusters it leads should implement and prioritize the four policy commitments (centrality of protection, accountability to affected populations, humanitarian-development nexus and localization) in addition to other institutional commitments such as gender-based violence risk mitigation and disability. UNICEF should ensure systematic dissemination of relevant guidance to all staff.

61.   **Recommendation 2:** In prioritizing its role for the collective of humanitarian actors, UNICEF should align its internal systems with its CLA responsibilities, ensuring that these systems sufficiently recognize the central importance of the CLA role, and reflect the agency-wide accountability for the fulfilment of these responsibilities.

(a)   In reviewing the accountability framework for humanitarian coordination, including information management, UNICEF should ensure that CLA accountability is systematically addressed, as mandated by the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, starting with a compact between UNICEF senior management, regional offices and country offices that includes clear accountabilities for humanitarian coordination and established metrics for performance management for CLA staff at all levels (as part of key performance indicators and performance management systems).

    i.   To ensure that the CLA responsibilities are part of line management and supervisory responsibilities, UNICEF country representatives must be held accountable by their supervisors (regional directors) for confirming that the key CLA positions are created and filled; supporting and supervising cluster coordinators; empowering them to provide leadership; and bringing cluster priorities to the humanitarian country team and other relevant inter-agency forums. Likewise, regional directors should also report on how they have worked with representatives in humanitarian countries and supported them to fulfil the CLA role.

    ii.   UNICEF should mainstream CLA responsibilities in annual workplans and budgets, country programme documents (and other relevant documents related to developing a new country programme), programme strategy notes and country office performance management using the key performance indicators, monitoring and audit frameworks, job descriptions, etc.

    iii.   UNICEF should also further invest systematically in global-level analyses of cluster performance.

(b)   UNICEF human resource systems must better support the CLA role to ensure that proper capacities are put in place accordingly.

    i.   In recognizing that the cluster coordinator is a key leadership position, UNICEF should ensure that a proper career path is established for the coordination function, to attract and retain talent. Conversely, those in (other) leadership positions, such as programme section chiefs, should fulfil a cluster coordination position as part of their career trajectories.

    ii.   UNICEF should prioritize the calibre of staff in cluster coordination positions, rather than overrelying on standby partners for filling cluster (leadership) positions. To support this, UNICEF should ensure that staff with CLA responsibilities are prioritized in humanitarian learning and knowledge management trainings to ensure that they have adequate knowledge, skills and capacities to address the challenges that UNICEF experiences as part of its CLA responsibilities and to support the creation of viable career pathways within UNICEF.

    iii.   UNICEF should prioritize emergency recruitment, establishing an internal talent pool/deployment roster of properly trained professionals in cluster coordination, who are available to quickly deploy on surge to fill gaps.

iv.   To help take a significant step forward in effective recruitment of cluster coordination and information management positions, UNICEF should also further promote the competency frameworks for cluster coordination and information management developed by the global clusters.

v.   UNICEF should prioritize investment and support to building national capacities for leadership and coordination in humanitarian situations, as relevant.

vi.   UNICEF should strengthen its capacities to more systematically track and monitor resources, including human resources/staffing and funding, provided to cluster coordination work.

62.   **Recommendation 3:** To strengthen accountability and learning, UNICEF should use the knowledge and experience it has gained as CLA, and from evaluations such as this one, to push for a reflection on how clusters can be adapted to the changing context in which humanitarian response takes place, and lead changes in IASC to clarify the underlying tenets of the cluster approach.

(a)   UNICEF should advocate for cluster guidance to be updated and cluster coordination processes to be streamlined and, where possible, rationalized, as part of an IASC reflection on the clusters and their future. This recalibration, which is critical to better serve affected populations, includes ensuring a balance between coordination activities and leadership, while moving away from time-consuming processes that have ultimately detracted from leading the cluster strategically and realizing collective leadership. UNICEF should play a leadership role in any updating efforts undertaken by IASC, given its (co-)CLA experience.

(b)   To ensure that clusters can adequately respond to the growth and complexity of humanitarian needs, UNICEF should continue to systematically advocate within IASC for multi-year planning/funding for humanitarian needs overviews/humanitarian response plans, strengthening monitoring of needs and programme interventions, including of both coverage and quality; and addressing issues of deactivation and transition of clusters (for example, developing guidelines and/or notes on transitions).

(c)   The Executive Director of UNICEF should report at least once a year on the way that UNICEF is delivering on its CLA responsibilities, including accountability for senior leaders for supporting the clusters, at the IASC principals meeting and to the UNICEF Executive Board. When relevant, the Executive Director/Deputy Executive Director/Director of the Office of Emergency Programmes should also propose adjustments or new ideas related to the CLA role based on UNICEF experiences. Through this engagement, UNICEF will also be setting an example, which principals of other agencies that hold CLA roles might follow.

(d)   UNICEF should advocate for the clarification of co-leadership on the part of IASC, with a view to achieving a stronger definition of the function and its implications, especially in terms of accountabilities (for example, staffing, provider of last resort).

(e)   UNICEF should advocate for IASC to review the concept of provider of last resort with a view to making the concept more transparent and ensuring that it is more consistently applied (or rejected); currently, the concept obscures, rather than strengthens, accountability.

VI. 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.   *Also takes note* of the evaluation of the UNICEF role as cluster lead/co-lead agency, its summary (E/ICEF/2022/19) and its management response (E/ICEF/2022/20).

Annex

Evaluation of the UNICEF role as cluster lead/co-lead agency

1.   Due to space limitations, the evaluation report of the UNICEF role as cluster lead/co-lead agency is not contained within the present annex.

2.   The report is available from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website: www.unicef.org/evaluation/executive-board

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