

UNICEF Executive Board

Annual Session 13-16 June 2023

Agenda item 9: Evaluation of the UNICEF Level 3 response to the global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and management response

Mr. President,

I have the honor to deliver this statement on behalf of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Moldova, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, the United States, EU as a donor, and my own country, Sweden.

Thank you, Director McCouch, for the presentation on the *Evaluation of UNICEF's Level 3 response to the COVID-19 pandemic* and to your team who have made this evaluation a key piece for learning. We welcome the management response, particularly the emphasis placed on learning and change management, and we note that most recommendations have already been implemented.

WHO only recently declared that COVID-19 no longer constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. But its consequences are far from over. The pandemic has caused 6,9 million deaths, hundreds of millions infected. The pandemic entailed massive socio-economic consequences. It exacerbated inequalities and reversed development gains, in particular for women and children who already experience poverty, exclusion and marginalization. The pandemic resulted in a massive setback in education, gaps in general immunisation and other longer-term effects on our children.

Now, we have a duty to learn from this.

UNICEF's adaptative capacity was a key factor, enabling the fund to support governments in delivering almost two billion vaccines worldwide and lifesaving health supplies. UNICEF was also instrumental to uphold services to children such as access to learning for over 300 million children, increased support to WASH and social protection. The evaluation shows that flexible financing was instrumental to swiftly adjust programs.

The pandemic showed the need for a collective response. We welcome UNICEF's contribution to the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan and to COVAX and encourage further learning from these. Through COVAX, bottlenecks for vaccination were identified and vaccination rates increased. The newly launched G7 MCM Delivery Partnership will continue contributing to an equitable access.

Many countries were caught off guard by the pandemic. We are pleased to see that the first recommendation of the report has already been implemented. It points to UNICEF's important role to support governments in preparedness, contingency planning, and capacity building. This will continue to be valuable as we brace for future pandemics.

The evaluation shows UNICEF's comparative advantage in being adaptive through multisectoral collaboration in operations. This is an opportunity to deepen the collective learnings on organizational behavior for multi-sectorial collaboration in line with the strategic plan.

However, one of the findings indicates a clearly uneven mainstreaming of gender and equity dimensions, including gender disaggregated data. Given the consequences for girls and boys with increased vulnerability for gender-based violence and mental health issues, we underline the necessity to learn from this

– we expect of UNICEF to do better. We also ask of UNICEF to prioritize accountability to affected populations and to ensure such systems are in place.

The evaluation underlines the importance of pre-existing structures for coordination of large-scale responses. This is an important aspect of development effectiveness principles and UNICEF could have benefited from incorporating this more clearly. We look forward to continued discussions on improved multilateral coordination ahead of future pandemics.

Globally and regionally, we acknowledge that the COVID-19 response required enhanced collaboration between nations and between agencies, as identified by MOPAN in their study of the multilaterals' COVID-response, and that Last Mile delivery support is crucial for a swift global response to pandemics, especially in fragile and humanitarian contexts. In light of this, we would have welcomed more information on findings regarding the global ethos for partnerships both within and outside of the UN. UNICEF's coordination, procurement and on the ground presence was invaluable to the global response amongst ACT-A partners, especially in their leadership on delivery of medical countermeasures.

Collectively we support the recent call by the World Health Assembly to strengthen emergency preparedness and response in program countries, particularly in the least developed countries (the LDCs), and support UNICEF's critical role in the multilateral health system. Resilient health systems are at the core of overcoming any health crisis. Thus, it is critical to invest in strengthening health systems and to address the challenge of a diminishing health workforce, particularly in LDC's.

In closing, we trust that internal learning exercises have equipped UNICEF to build on the extraordinary achievements during COVID-19, prepare to mitigate future pandemics, and, foremost, that UNICEF responses should always place the most vulnerable at the center. For every child everywhere.

Thank you.