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Update on UNICEF humanitarian action

Summary

The present report provides a status update on the Humanitarian Review,^a as requested by the Executive Board at its annual session of June 2023. This is the third annual update to the UNICEF Executive Board on the Humanitarian Review. The report provides a status update on progress since November 2022 in implementing the 70 recommendations emerging from the Humanitarian Review. It includes detailed updates linked to recommendations in the following areas: (a) preparedness and anticipatory action; (b) humanitarian data; (c) localization in humanitarian action; (d) humanitarian supply; and (e) humanitarian capacity.

^a UNICEF, “Strengthening UNICEF’s Humanitarian Action, The Humanitarian Review: Findings and Recommendations” (2020).

* E/ICEF/2024/1.

I. Overview

1. The Humanitarian Review was undertaken in 2019 and 2020 to assess UNICEF humanitarian systems and structures, to ensure that the organization is prepared and can respond to future humanitarian contexts and rapidly evolving needs efficiently and effectively.
2. The Humanitarian Review report was completed in 2020 and put forward 70 recommendations to transform UNICEF humanitarian action. The recommendations were endorsed by UNICEF senior management and are slated to be completed by the end of 2025.
3. As of October 2023, implementation of 16 of the 70 recommendations have been completed (up from the 5 completed recommendations reported to the Executive Board in February 2023), 46 are under way and the remaining 8 are yet to start.
4. When the Humanitarian Review report was initially released in 2020, the cost of implementing the 70 recommendations was estimated to be \$32 million. To date, UNICEF has invested \$7 million to implement the recommendations.
5. There has been significant progress in some of the recommendations since November 2022, for example, in preparedness and anticipatory action, which included further evolution of the Emergency Preparedness Platform and finalization of an anticipatory action framework to improve the cohesiveness and consistency of the UNICEF approach to anticipatory action. Additionally, as of October 2023, allocations for country office preparedness through the First Action Initiative and the Co-Funding Initiative have already far outpaced those of 2022.
6. The Humanitarian Review made several recommendations on how UNICEF could collect, analyse and use data and evidence to improve humanitarian response and the monitoring of results. Implementation of these recommendations is gathering pace. For example, after laying the groundwork for an institutional contract, UNICEF expects to recruit an external vendor to provide in-person, on-demand conflict, and sociopolitical analysis to senior management in the UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes, as well as link into the organization's existing horizon scanning work. Pilot work on "data readiness" – which can increase the speed and accuracy of humanitarian response – has been undertaken in the Eastern and Southern Africa region in 2022 and 2023. And, to further strengthen the analysis and use of monitoring data for decision-making, UNICEF is currently prototyping a new equity mapping and analysis tool in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Libya and Mali.
7. UNICEF has made progress in implementing the localization agenda in humanitarian action, exceeding the Grand Bargain target for funding transferred to local actors, including women-led organizations, developing their institutional capacity, increasing local decision-making power in UNICEF-led coordination structures, increasing local procurement and production of ready-to-use therapeutic food, among others. A new localization technical note, issued in March 2023, is a cornerstone of this strategy.
8. UNICEF continues efforts to better integrate supply needs into programme planning and response, one of the recommendations of the Humanitarian Review. This is particularly critical in the response to public health emergencies, which can be supply-heavy. A notable example of this, and potential model for other health emergencies, is the establishment of the Global Cholera Emergency Cell in March 2023 to coordinate response decisions and supply allocations across the many countries where UNICEF works to meet the needs of children and families affected by cholera outbreaks.

9. Despite the progress made on many recommendations, realizing the vision of the Humanitarian Review has come up against some challenges. Implementation of the recommendations began against the backdrop of a prolonged global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic; and, linked to this but reaching far beyond it, the multiple and unprecedented number of emergencies globally has soared in just a few short years. This underscores the relevance of the aims of the Review – and yet this has also made it more challenging to secure the financial and human resources required to implement the recommendations of the Humanitarian Review in full.

10. To move the work of the Humanitarian Review forward, UNICEF will undertake a midterm assessment of the Review and its recommendations, to be carried out early in 2024 (timed to coincide with the midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025). It is expected that the results of the midterm assessment will inform the remaining implementation period of the Humanitarian Review in 2024 and 2025. As part of this, UNICEF will work to prioritize the recommendations that have not been completed. There will also be a critical look at the best management structure for enacting the overarching vision of the Humanitarian Review, so that it can build on the positive work completed to date and deliver on its promise of more efficient, effective humanitarian assistance for the children who need it most.

II. Introduction

11. In 2019, UNICEF commissioned the Humanitarian Review to identify how the organization could become more effective and efficient in responding to children's needs in an increasingly complex humanitarian environment. A status update on the implementation of the Review's 70 recommendations was provided to the Executive Board in 2022 ([UNICEF/2022/EB/3](#)) and 2023 ([UNICEF/2023/EB/3](#)).

12. The present report provides an overall status update on the Review, including overarching progress and a discussion of some important challenges to its implementation. It also contains detailed updates linked to recommendations in the following areas:

- (a) Preparedness and anticipatory action;
- (b) Data/evidence and performance monitoring;
- (c) Localization in humanitarian action;
- (d) Humanitarian supply; and
- (e) Humanitarian capacity.

III. Update on the Humanitarian Review

A. Overall progress

13. As of October 2023, of the 70 recommendations contained in the Review, 16 have been completed, 46 are under way and the remaining 8 are yet to start.

14. Compared with the previous update to the Executive Board, at the first regular session in February 2023, the number of recommendations completed has improved significantly, from 5 to 16, notably recommendations in the areas of localization (updated strategy on localization issued in March 2023), accountability to affected populations (the new UNICEF Procedure on Monitoring released in October 2022 required integration of accountability to affected populations into all country office monitoring frameworks) and the recruitment of an Emergency Response Team access specialist in January 2023.

15. Of the eight recommendations not yet started, five are due to funding shortages since they require substantial investment and/or they have been overtaken by events: (a) establish a young humanitarian leadership development programme; (b) establish an internal Humanitarian Action Capacity-Building Fund; (c) finance cluster leadership using core UNICEF funding; (d) Establish new funding mechanisms for countries facing humanitarian crises with limited regular resources; and (e) identify ways to increase the inclusion of standby partners from the global South for deployment. The recommendations on establishing an internal Humanitarian Action Capacity-Building Fund and establishing new funding mechanisms for countries facing humanitarian crises with limited regular resources are not advisable in resource-scarce environments and attention should be focused instead on strengthening existing mechanisms such as the Global Humanitarian Thematic Fund to address these purposes. For the three remaining recommendations, clarity on the way forward is still under discussion and will be addressed during the upcoming midterm review: (a) Explore new configurations of headquarters field support; (b) review the allocation of the 7 per cent set-aside; and (c) establish strong community-led and managed platforms capable of being engaged as soon as an emergency hits.

16. Many activities and initiatives undertaken by UNICEF since the launch of the Review have furthered the overall goal of making UNICEF humanitarian action fit for the complex and dynamic era of humanitarian crises. Some of the “recommendation areas” have seen significant gains (for example, cultivating and supporting the humanitarian workforce that is the backbone of UNICEF action in emergencies, and which was extensively covered in the previous update to the Executive Board on this topic). Some recommendations were broad and covered activities that were already under way at the time of the Review (for example, revision of the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, and revision of key Emergency Procedures and the Emergency Preparedness Platform).

Funding status

17. Of the \$32 million required to implement the recommendation from the Review, nearly \$7 million has been allocated thus far (\$5 million from Global Humanitarian Thematic Funding and \$1.9 million from additional donor funding).

B. Preparedness and anticipatory action

18. UNICEF is adapting to the growing risks that children face by investing in key preparedness, risk analysis, and decision-making tools to better inform its own understanding and its work with partners and Governments. The goal is to constantly improve emergency response for children and mitigate the risks and impacts that emergencies have on them.

19. Because of its wide and decentralized presence, multisector mandate and cluster leadership role, UNICEF is uniquely positioned to detect early warning signs and lead on preparedness. The Humanitarian Review offered multiple concrete recommendations to guide UNICEF in building on this and in reinforcing efforts to expand the organization’s preparedness, anticipatory action and risk analysis work.

20. UNICEF preparedness systems have undergone improvements and expansion since 2020, partly in response to the findings of the Humanitarian Review that these systems tended to encourage more reactive rather than proactive and agile emergency responses. In June 2023, UNICEF launched a second upgraded version of the Emergency Preparedness Platform (the first upgrade was in late 2020). The latest upgrade enables offices to better implement risk analysis, minimum preparedness standards and preparedness planning. A fully revamped platform (EPP 3.0) is being developed and will be launched in the second half of 2024. It aims to improve the

overall capability of offices to prepare for emergency response, and to enhance team collaboration and communication. The new version will provide greater flexibility and accessibility to users; it will also be connected to other UNICEF systems to increase automation and contribute to country-level preparedness. UNICEF will continue its investment in disaster risk reduction and strengthening the resilience of communities, institutions and national systems as crisis are becoming more frequent and complex as well as lasting longer and affecting more children than ever.

21. UNICEF finalized an anticipatory action framework in August 2023. It will help to ensure a coherent and systematic approach to institutionalizing and scaling up anticipatory action. This framework describes the approach of UNICEF and provides guidance on how to engage in anticipatory action. UNICEF is currently implementing anticipatory action in 13 countries and is developing projects in another 7 countries.

22. The dedicated UNICEF funding stream for emergency preparedness made \$8.21 million in preparedness funding allocations from January 2023 through mid-October 2023, matched by \$3.07 million provided by regional and country offices (through the Co-Funding Initiative), providing support to 35 country offices. These amounts were significantly higher than 2022 levels of \$4.27 million in allocations, matched by \$650,000 from regional and country offices (through the Co-Funding Initiative), supporting 20 country offices. The 2023 funds enabled key investments in country office, regional office, and partner preparedness for such risks as droughts, floods, storms, cyclones and public health emergencies. For example, a \$1.1 million allocation allowed the Haiti Country Office to pre-position emergency supplies. A \$0.69 million allocation contributed to the multisectoral preparedness of the Afghanistan Country Office vis-à-vis the resurgence of cholera in the country.

23. Starting in 2023, a percentage of Humanitarian Action for Children appeal budgets are dedicated to preparedness (5 per cent on average).

C. Data/evidence and performance monitoring

24. The approach by UNICEF to data related to children in emergencies is now incorporated as a key component in the new UNICEF data strategy. This component covers types of data initiatives needed before, during and after emergencies so that UNICEF can develop the capabilities to generate, analyse and use relevant data to improve decision-making. This will play out in the following ways:

(a) Data readiness: the most important (and often overlooked) area of data work is readiness. UNICEF can prepare for the next emergency even if it cannot foretell all the details of it, by preparing and maintaining a geocoded database of relevant baseline data; establishing partnerships for access to data (e.g. satellite picture or mobile phone data), analytical tools, and the protocols to use the data, all guided by the principles of Responsible Data for Children (rd4c.org). Pilot work on such readiness has been undertaken in the Eastern and Southern Africa region in 2022 and 2023, and it can be brought to scale with sufficient funding. Such readiness will increase the speed and accuracy of emergency response and will help the organization avoid the “data frenzy” that usually occurs when crises emerge. During an emergency, it is vital to mobilize support particularly around spatial analytics, incorporating Big Data as appropriate (e.g. in the Ukraine refugee outflow, Facebook advertising analytics were key to tracking population movement) – and bring these together with the administrative data system and rapid survey data. This has been undertaken ad hoc in all major emergencies, most recently in using Big Data to estimate population movements and water system usage in the Gaza Strip.

25. Also important and still at an early stage in UNICEF (and other agencies) is ensuring that during the later phases of emergency, data systems are built with a long-

term outlook; for example, administrative data systems are strengthened and resilient – work that has started by developing and piloting the Administrative Maturity Data Model in select countries.¹ This ensures that the mass of data collected and used during a humanitarian response is not lost, but rather forms the basis for situation and monitoring data through the end of the emergency into a time of stability. A special case must be made for support to data systems in times of fragility or long-term emergency, to ensure (as above) that these data systems are built sustainability, not as ad-hoc responses to an emergency. This requires strategic planning for what is a minimum viable sustainable data system, and targeted support to ensure that it is operational over the long term under national ownership.

Results monitoring

26. At the inter-agency level, UNICEF is part of the humanitarian monitoring working group, providing leadership on the development of common guidance for equity-focused disaggregated data. Humanitarian and nexus priorities were included in the Integrated Results and Resources Framework of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025; these priorities are now reflected in a set of global core standard indicators that are mapped to the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action and can be embedded in country programme monitoring plans. This streamlines data collection and analysis, particularly for countries in protracted crises and contexts of fragility.

27. To further strengthen the analysis and use of monitoring data for decision-making, UNICEF is currently prototyping a new equity mapping and analysis tool in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Libya and Mali. This supports dynamic intersectional analysis of deprivations, risk and vulnerability, programme performance and programme bottleneck data.

28. To further strengthen the real-time availability and analysis of programme implementation monitoring data, 63 priority countries have been trained in the UNICEF eTools Field Monitoring Module. These complement existing digital data collection tools by supporting qualitative area-based monitoring, with a particular focus on incorporating commitments on accountability to affected populations and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse within monitoring systems. The Syrian Arab Republic has been an early pioneer in the effective use of the Module, conducting more than 3,500 recorded field monitoring visits that have provided real-time analysis of programme risks, performance, bottlenecks and corrective actions.

D. Localization in humanitarian action

29. UNICEF defines localization as a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership and capacity of local actors in humanitarian action. This manifests in various ways, including through direct funding of local partners and by investing in their institutional capacity and empowerment.

30. Following the launch of the Humanitarian Review, UNICEF intensified its efforts on localization, particularly by partnering with national and local actors, including working with municipalities and local and state authorities.

31. UNICEF continues to transfer funds to local actors. In 2022, UNICEF transferred \$1.5 billion in cash to partners at all levels for humanitarian response. Out

¹ The Administrative Data Maturity Model is a framework developed by UNICEF intended to assess the maturity level of countries or organizations in effectively managing and utilizing administrative data.

of this, 39 per cent was transferred to local actors, exceeding the Grand Bargain target of 25 per cent.

32. To support a systematic approach to localization, in March 2023 UNICEF released a localization technical note/strategy, which is now available in English, French, Arabic and Spanish. This strategy promotes principled partnership, capacity strengthening, use of local surge capacity, inclusion of local actors in leadership positions within coordination mechanisms, the humanitarian programme cycle and localization, the country programme development process and localization, transferring predictable and flexible funding to local actors, engaging local communities, comprehensive risk management with local partners, local governance, local economies, and ensuring visibility and communication with local actors.

33. In 2022, UNICEF developed a guidance note on strengthening the institutional capacity of local actors, and provided support to the development of a joint preparedness framework for subnational local actors with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. This is all part of a transformative – as opposed to transactional – approach to localization. It involves investment in institutional capacity strengthening, comprehensive risk-sharing and linking local partner contingency planning and funding mechanisms. UNICEF has revised its partnership procedures to ensure that local partners are advanced 7 per cent overhead cost.

34. Part of the transformative approach means investing in local economies in areas where UNICEF delivers humanitarian action. UNICEF is committed to supporting the local production of medical products and supplies and to procuring more of the supplies locally to address the equity concerns arising from the COVID-19 response.

35. UNICEF supports local actors to be part of social service delivery systems and explores how they can contribute to the sustainability of responses and the enhancement of capacities over time. To enhance local partner capacity, UNICEF developed a humanitarian learning package. This will ensure equitable access to high-quality, localized humanitarian learning and will provide national and local partners with the skills and knowledge needed for improved humanitarian action. Ten new learning packages for face-to-face delivery of localized learning content have been developed, and long-term agreements have been signed with training providers in each UNICEF region. The development of a multilingual learning platform is progressing through a partnership between the Office of Emergency Programmes, the UNICEF Learning Passport team in the Programme Group and the “Leave No Language Behind” team in the Office of Innovation.

36. UNICEF remains engaged as a leader and key partner in global and inter-agency efforts to further the localization of humanitarian response.

37. UNICEF has commissioned a global thematic evaluation of its efforts to localize humanitarian action. The evaluation, which is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2024, will assess the UNICEF approach to localization in humanitarian action, the roll-out of localization efforts across the organization, and the impact that the organization has on inter-agency processes around localization.

E. Humanitarian supply

38. The Humanitarian Review highlighted the need to strengthen the integration of supply needs into programme response planning, working more closely with the private sector to build supply networks to ensure continuity within constrained markets. In 2022, UNICEF purchased significantly higher quantities of ready-to-use therapeutic food supplies from manufacturers located close to emergency-affected countries. UNICEF purchased and procured ready-to-use therapeutic food supplies

from 21 suppliers in 2022, of which 90 per cent were in countries closer to where children require treatment.

39. The response to multiple large-scale cholera outbreaks in 2022 and 2023, and the establishment of the Global Cholera Emergency Cell in March 2023, are strong examples of improved supply programming for public health emergencies through coordination, which was a key recommendation of the Humanitarian Review. The Global Cholera Emergency Cell helps to prioritize interventions and allocate essential supplies and human and financial resources across sectors and countries, for better cholera preparedness and response in countries and communities. The Global Cholera Emergency Cell is also connected to the World Health Organization (WHO) Incident Management System, which coordinates the overall response.

40. In public health emergencies, timely access to specific medical countermeasures are paramount to curb the spread of disease – a point underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic but not unique to it. This means that UNICEF needs to enhance its preparedness efforts to ensure that resources and supplies for public health emergencies are in place for the immediate response. Being ready for this uncertainty will enable UNICEF to provide equitable coverage to the most vulnerable and ensure consistent and timely last-mile delivery.

41. UNICEF continues to work with WHO under a health emergency preparedness, resilience and response memorandum of understanding to strengthen supply coordination, under the “access to countermeasures, including supply chain systems and procurement” rubric. This will, in turn, improve overall supply programming for preparedness and response to public health emergencies.

42. To strengthen supply preparedness and response and enable better access to supplies, particularly in a climate of multiple overlapping complex emergencies, work is under way to increase the global contingency stock levels of key emergency supplies. This includes essential supplies for health emergencies (personal protective equipment, health kits, etc.).

F. Humanitarian capacity

43. The UNICEF Humanitarian Leadership Workshop series has expanded significantly in scope and quality since its inception. Demand for the Workshop has also grown positively throughout UNICEF. In 2023, a total of 92 senior managers (54 per cent women, 46 per cent men) were trained across two streams: Leading in Emergencies and Leading in Complex and High-Threat Environments. The training uses a blended approach and integrates the implementation of leadership action plans to ensure that skills directly impact the work environment. The course includes core capacity gaps identified in the Humanitarian Review, including humanitarian advocacy, access, preparedness, coordination, security risk management and accountability to affected populations.

44. A Humanitarian Learning and Development Strategy (2023–2025) is being rolled out and comprises a dedicated Humanitarian Learning Channel in Agora, with 40 modules (based on the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action) for face-to-face and blended learning that can be rolled out in the regions where UNICEF works. The strategy will provide a more sustained, systematic and measurable approach to building skills and knowledge for humanitarian action.

IV. Challenges

45. Given the breadth of programming and operational areas covered by the Humanitarian Review, it has been challenging to fully implement the

recommendations due to competing emergency priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic occurred and endured for several years. It upended the plans, procedures, processes and organizational workflows of every single division and office in UNICEF. The pandemic itself acted as an accelerator of some changes (for example, by elevating public health emergencies response, one recommendation area of the Review, to a corporate priority), and a hindrance to others (by adding to overall humanitarian needs and workload of the organization). Funding has also been a constraint, delaying the implementation of some of the recommendations that require substantial investment.

V. The way forward

46. Midway through the Review’s implementation period, it is time to assess and make the necessary adjustments in the context of newly emerging humanitarian trends and landscape. To inform the process of navigating the remaining two years of the implementation timeline for the Humanitarian Review, UNICEF will carry out a midterm assessment of the Humanitarian Review implementation thus far, timed to coincide with the overall midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. This assessment is planned for the first quarter of 2024.

VI. Conclusion

47. The goal of the Humanitarian Review – to improve UNICEF humanitarian action so that it can more effectively serve children – is still highly relevant. Achieving full implementation of the various recommendations of the Review will help UNICEF and partners to more efficiently and effectively reach children, uphold rights, protect childhoods and save lives.
