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Evaluation of phase II (2020–2023) of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage

Summary[**]

Summary

   The joint evaluation of phase II (2020–2023) of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage aims to independently assess the Programme's contribution at global, regional and country levels to ending child marriage. The elimination of child marriage and other harmful practices is a Sustainable Development Goal target, and also a strategic priority of both organizations. The evaluation seeks to identify good practices and lessons learned from the implementation of phase II in order to inform the development of phase III, as well as efforts to end child marriage globally. Building upon the findings, the evaluation offers a series of recommendations related to programme design, contexualization and adaptability; strengthening coordination and programme convergence; deepening and further embedding the gender-transformative approach; generation and use of evidence; and improving sustainability. It examines the integration of the gender-transformative approach, analyses progress in relation to the "leave no one behind" principle, and explores the catalytic effect of the Global Programme within and beyond the 12 programme countries. Other focus areas include the added value of joint programming and coordination by the two agencies and how the Programme has adapted to crises.

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

I.   Introduction

1.   More than 640 million women alive in 2023 were married as children.[1] One in every five girls is married, or in a union, before reaching 18 years of age.[2] The International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and its Programme of Action, as well as the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 and its Platform for Action, called for the recognition of human rights and freedoms for the girl child and the elimination of harmful practices that violate these fundamental rights.[3]

2.   The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF were instrumental in securing these global commitments and have worked over the past 40 years to implement programmes to reduce harmful practices based on gender inequality and human rights violations of the girl child. In 2015, both agencies came together to tackle these issues through the Global Programme to End Child Marriage (Global Programme), contributing to the global movement to end child marriage. The intended impact of the Programme is for adolescent girls to fully enjoy a childhood free from the risk of marriage and to experience healthier and more empowered life transitions, including making choices about their education, sexuality, relationships, marriage and childbearing.[4] The Programme is currently concluding its second phase and planning to commence phase III.

3.   Against this background, the evaluation offices of UNFPA and UNICEF commissioned an external, independent joint evaluation of phase II (2020–2023) of the Global Programme. The evaluation builds on a series of independent evaluative exercises, including an evaluability assessment conducted in 2017, an evaluation of phase I (2016–2019) of the Global Programme in 2019 and a joint assessment of adaptations to the Global Programme in light of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, conducted from April 2021 to July 2021.

A.   Background and context

4.   The impact of child marriage is significant and far-reaching. Adolescent girls married young have limited economic opportunities and are less likely to continue their education. This limits girls' choices and opportunities throughout their lives. Research shows that young women married as children are more likely to experience physical and/or sexual violence as adults. Further, young girls are less likely to be able to negotiate safe sexual practices and be equipped with information to be able to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health. Experiencing early pregnancy, before a girl's body is physically mature, increases the risk of pregnancy-related complications and maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among adolescent girls aged 15–19 years in developing countries.[5]

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[1] UNICEF, "Is an end to child marriage within reach? Latest trends and future prospects, 2023 update" (New York, 2023).

[2] UNFPA and UNICEF, *UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage: Phase II programme document, 2020–2023* (New York, 2019).

[3] UNFPA, "Report of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5–13 September 1994" (A/CONF.171/13/Rev.1); and United Nations, "Fourth World Conference on Women, 4–15 September 1995, Beijing, China", available at https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/beijing1995 (accessed on 13 November 2023).
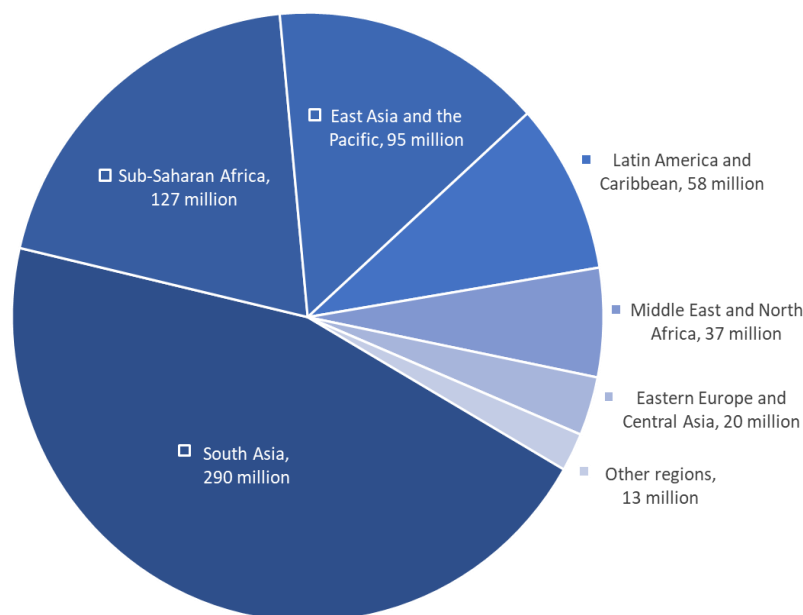
[4] *UNFPA–UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage Phase II: Programme document*, p. 25.

[5] Human Rights Watch, "Q & A: Child marriage and violations of girls' rights" (2023). Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/14/q-child-marriage-and-violations-girls-rights (accessed on 1 November 2023).

5.   While child marriage occurs among both boys and girls, girls are disproportionally affected, with prevalence rates among girls about six times higher, globally. Figure I provides an overview of the global distribution of child marriage.

Figure I
Percentage distribution of women and girls who were first married or in union before age 18

East Asia and the Pacific, 95 million

Latin America and Caribbean, 58 million

Sub-Saharan Africa, 127 million

Middle East and North Africa, 37 million

Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 20 million

Other regions, 13 million

South Asia, 290 million

Source: UNICEF, "Is an end to child marriage within reach? Latest trends and future prospects, 2023 update", May 2023.

6.   While the prevalence of child marriage has decreased globally over the past decade, from 23 per cent to 19 per cent, the decline has been uneven globally, and no region is on track to eliminate the practice by 2030, as required by the Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 target.[6] In addition, it is estimated that up to 10 million more girls will likely be married as children globally by 2030 due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.   Over the last decades, the global movement to end child marriage has informed priorities and programming within UNFPA and UNICEF. As early as 2008, the UNICEF child protection strategy identified child marriage as an essential child protection issue to be tackled. Action against child marriage is an organizational priority, as reflected in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 and the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, at impact and output levels. The UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2022–2025 and Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy, 2022–2025 also incorporate ending child marriage as programmatic priorities.

8.   Within UNFPA, ending gender-based violence and all harmful practices, including child marriage, is one of the three transformative results of its Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 as well as the previous strategic plan. Child marriage has been a specific focus since 1994, anchored in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, and is a core priority for both the Technical Division's Sexual and Reproductive Health Branch and the Gender and Human Rights Branch. In addition, the UNFPA global strategy for adolescents and

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[6] Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3: Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

youth, titled My Body, My Life, My World, and the Gender Strategy, 2022–2025 identify the reduction of gender-based violence and harmful practices, including child marriage, as a critical pathway to gender equality and decision-making for adolescent girls.

9. The Global Programme is a joint initiative that turns these and other United Nations commitments into tangible actions for children, supporting Governments and civil society partners to accelerate actions to end child marriage. The primary goal of the Global Programme is to contribute significantly to the realization of Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3 on the elimination of harmful practices – directly in 12 programme countries, as well as indirectly in other countries – through the Programme's methodology, resources, data and influence.

10. The 12 programme countries are distributed among four regions, as follows: (a) Eastern and Southern Africa: Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia; (b) Middle East and North Africa: Yemen; (c) West and Central Africa: Burkina Faso, Ghana, the Niger and Sierra Leone; and (d) South Asia: Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

11. Primary rights holders of the Programme are adolescent girls (aged 10–19 years) in the 12 programme countries, including those most marginalized. Secondary rights holders are women, men, boys, families and communities that, through the Programme, have access to resources and opportunities, and are supported by systems that improve their health, education and safety, and address poverty and insecurity as key drivers of child marriage. Further, potential beneficiaries include those adolescent girls, women, men, boys, families and communities that benefit from the extended reach of the Global Programme to countries not directly included in the Programme.

12. Designed as a 15-year programme (2016–2030), the Global Programme is being implemented in three phases, as shown in figure II.

Figure II
Aims of the phases of the Global Programme

Aims	Phase I: Initial learning and implementation (2016–2019)	Phase II (midterm): Expanding scalable models 2020–2023)	Phase III (longer term): National coverage of models (2024–2030)
Change attitudes and behaviours	• Lay the foundations of attitude change among a critical mass of families and communities for longer-term shifts in behaviours and norms on child marriage	• Use the demonstration and catalytic power of (i) strengthened systems; (ii) mobilized communities; and (iii) empowered girls to further accelerate progress at significantly large scale	• Significantly larger proportions of girls fully enjoy a childhood free from the risk of marriage, and experience healthier, safer and more empowered life transitions, including through making choices about their education, sexuality, relationships, marriage and childbearing
Strengthen institutions and systems	• Strengthen critical institutions and systems in selected locations and countries to deliver quality services and opportunities for a significant number of adolescent girls	• Scale up interventions and strengthened systems to reach more girls, locations and countries	• Working models are mainstreamed within and between countries • Higher educational levels for girls • Lower adolescent pregnancy rates
Political leadership and resources	• Generate political will and mobilize financial resources to end child marriage	• Increase political and social support to end child marriage • Engage more Governments, donors and actors • Finance and implement budgeted plan	• Largely local ownership and large-scale implementation
Measurable change	• Demonstrable change in some locations	• Demonstrable change in some significant locations of considerable size	• Decline in child marriage rates in a significant number of high-burden countries

Source: Global Programme: Phase II programme document, 2020–2023.

13. The Global Programme developed a global theory of change that outlines the conceptual and programmatic approach taken by the Programme and the key assumptions underlying its change pathways. The first pillar focuses on strategies and outputs that contribute to adolescent girls being able to make more informed choices regarding marriage, education, and sexual and reproductive health. The second pillar operates at the systemic level, focusing on the capacity of relevant sectors to respond to the needs of adolescent girls. This is to be achieved through system strengthening, institutionalization of sectoral interventions and addressing poverty drivers of child

marriage. The third pillar outlines the intermediate outcomes related to adolescent-and youth-responsive legal and policy contexts, where Governments have the capacity to make and enact laws and generate data and evidence towards addressing the drivers of child marriage. In addition, a gender-transformative approach was developed, making gender transformation an overarching strategy and acknowledging gender discrimination and shifts towards positive gender norms as critical approaches to ending child marriage.

Figure III
Theory of change of phase II of the Global Programme

Source: Global Programme: Phase II programme document, 2020–2023. (abridged version)

14. The Global Programme is funded by the Governments of Belgium, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom, and by the European Union and Zonta International. The final budget agreed with the partners for the period 2020–2023 was $100,046,951.

II. Evaluation approach

15. The purpose of the evaluation was to independently assess the achievement of outputs and contributions to outcomes in Phase II, provide information that supports evidence-based decision-making, and inform the work of the Global Programme beyond 2023.

16. The evaluation focused on learning among stakeholders at all levels and ascertaining the Programme's accountability for the results achieved. Further, it sought to identify good practices and lessons learned from the implementation of phase II and recommend changes for phase III. The learning from the evaluation is intended to help improve the phase III programme design, implementation and management by UNFPA and UNICEF programme managers and implementing partners at all levels.

17. More specifically, the evaluation aimed to:

(a) Assess the results achieved against objectives;

(b) Assess the sustainability of the results achieved;

(c) Assess the extent to which issues of human rights, disability, cultural sensitivity, equity and gender equality have been taken into consideration in programme implementation;

(d) Assess the efficiency of implementation by both agencies;

(e)   Assess the effectiveness of the joint management modalities at global, regional and national levels;

(f)   Assess the extent of coordination with partners at the various levels of the Programme (global, regional and headquarters); and

(g)   Produce clear and evidence-based conclusions and actionable recommendations, identify lessons learned and good practices that support and inform decision-making for the Programme.

18.   The evaluation assessed the contribution of the Global Programme to the outcomes it aims to achieve using the standard criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. The assumptions of the Programme's theory of change were also tested using the data collected. The evaluation used a mixed methods approach, and included three types of case studies: "deep dive" (in-country), desk case studies (remote) and a global/regional case study. The four countries selected for "deep dive" case studies were Ethiopia, Ghana, India and Sierra Leone.

19.   The evaluation aimed in particular to assess the integration of the gender-transformative approach, analyse progress in relation to the application of the principle of "leave no one behind", and explore the catalytic effect of the Global Programme within and beyond the 12 countries. Other focus areas were the added value of joint programming and coordination by the two agencies in terms of programme efficiency, and how the Programme has adapted to crises, including humanitarian crises, natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as building resilience in systems to mitigate their effects in the future.

20.   The temporal scope of the evaluation covered the implementation of the Global Programme from 1 January 2020 to the point of data collection during the second quarter of 2023.

21.   Figure IV provides an overview of approach and data collection methods and levels at which the data were collected.

Figure IV
Overview of methods and tools

Source: Developed by the evaluation team.

III.   Evaluation conclusions

A.   Programme design

22.   The revised Global Programme theory of change was adequately contextualized and aligned with national contexts, including policies, strategies, programmes and legal frameworks. However, at the subnational level, there was uneven understanding of the strategic shift made in phase II to focus on girls' empowerment and agency. The Programme targeted beneficiaries based on evidence and stakeholder consultations but faced challenges striking a balance between the breadth and depth of interventions and coverage.

23.   The programme theory of change reflects key drivers of child marriage and is sufficiently broad to be adapted to individual country contexts. In phase II, the theory of change viewed child marriage not only as a human rights and child protection issue, but also as a gender and justice issue. Girls' empowerment and choice are central to intervention strategies at all levels. Emphasis was placed on building the facilitative and supportive social, economic and political environment necessary for transforming the position of women and girls in society, including shifts in discriminatory gender and social norms. Countries have adapted the theory of change to align with the context, national strategies, plans and existing partnership opportunities.

24.   However, many implementing partners are still gaining a deeper understanding of the girls' empowerment and choice shift in phase II. This has important consequences, as the understanding of this focus by implementing partners determines, for example, whether they or those they are trying to influence – such as government actors and community and religious leaders – work to simply delay marriage to 18 years, or see the larger objective as the fulfilment of girls' rights to education, autonomy and, ultimately, economic self-sufficiency. In addition, while countries have adapted the global theory of change and its intervention strategies to their local contexts, in-depth reflection on the drivers of child marriage for specific subpopulations of at-risk girls, and what the change pathways (its implementation for programming) could be, was not evident in most countries, with some notable exceptions.

25.   The Programme purposefully targeted specific geographical locations and, in many countries, subgroups of girls that are at highest risk of being married early. The Programme used prevalence rates and studies on drivers of child marriage, and consultations with both civil society organizations and government implementing partners to identify the locations and subgroups at greatest risk. Other criteria included accessibility, feasibility and prior programming experience and partnerships in the area. In many cases, the areas selected were remote rural areas. Within communities, the Programme went further and consulted with local leaders to identify which individual girls would be targeted. In some countries, specific subpopulations were reached, including the furthest behind.

26.   The identification and selection of programme sites and subgroups was adequate based on the available evidence, as the focus on hard-to-reach, remote locations and those being left behind directly responds to the principle of "leave no one behind". Nonetheless, some subgroups of at-risk girls were not yet reached by the Programme in all countries (e.g. girls with disabilities, married girls, girls in urban areas and in some humanitarian crisis contexts). Programme countries have begun to ensure that some elements of programming are more inclusive for girls with disabilities (e.g. specialized audio or pictorial materials). Refining the targeting to have greater focus on those left behind will be costly and complex, requiring systematic efforts and investment to generate evidence on specific drivers of child marriage and intersectional needs at the subpopulation level. This points to the challenge that the

Global Programme faces in delivering on its ambition to address the intersectional needs of girls across the Programme. The progress achieved in many locations and contexts is a validation of the theory of change, yet further consideration may be needed to accelerate progress among targeted populations of at-risk girls.

B. Programme convergence

27. There is evidence that the Global Programme achieved thematic convergence across sectors within agencies, between agencies, and in some cases across government sectors. However, the capacity of the Programme to deliver convergent programming at all levels largely depended on resource availability and joint programming opportunities, which was not always assured. Geographical convergence between agencies at subnational level was a particular challenge throughout the Programme, especially in hard-to-reach, rural or isolated areas, where access to a broad range of services remains limited.

28. Moreover, implementing different sectoral interventions in parallel (e.g. providing secondary education, adolescent sexual and reproductive health services, etc.) does not guarantee that the girls most at risk will benefit from all of the interventions. It is important to address diverse forms of discrimination and challenge power relations to empower girls and make them less vulnerable to child marriage. As a joint programme, with both agencies leading in different sectors, this requires convergence of intervention strategies and approaches in the same locations for the benefit of the same girls whenever they face multiple intersectional needs.

29. Achieving geographic convergence in the Programme has been challenging for a variety of institutional reasons, including pre-existing arrangements with Governments and implementing partners, consideration of ongoing programmes that can be built upon, and the resources required to implement programmes in new geographical areas. It may be unrealistic to expect Global Programme interventions across sectors to reach the same girls (i.e. to meet all their intersectional needs). Evidence exists on the value of reaching girls with a holistic package of interventions; however, in a low resource context, the Programme may need to assess which combination of interventions yield the best possible results towards empowering girls and ending child marriage.

C. The gender-transformative approach

30. The programme design placed the rights and empowerment of girls at the centre of its programming, aiming to address the root causes of gender inequality and changing discriminatory gender norms that underlie, perpetuate and tolerate the practice of child marriage. Accordingly, at the beginning of phase II, a gender-transformative approach was drafted, including five core strategies for implementation, and a gender-transformative approach accelerator toolkit was designed and rolled out in seven countries. The gender-transformative approach has been adopted as a critical component in all programme countries, although its implementation is still relatively nascent in most countries. One notable gap area is around evidence to understand the status and quality of adoption of the approach. Despite recognizing that effective gender-transformative approaches require solid gender analysis and an accurate understanding of local contexts, the necessary studies have not always been readily available to inform, adapt or localize gender-transformative approach strategies. In addition, a comprehensive approach to measuring changes in gender-discriminatory norms (unequal social norms, attitudes, practices and behaviours) is still required to capture the impact and effect of gender-transformative programming, particularly at subnational or community level. Efforts are also needed to ensure a common understanding of the gender-transformative

approach among partners. This requires strengthening capacities and understanding of some programme staff, and especially of implementing partners and civil society organizations.

D. Programme reach

31. The catalytic design of the Global Programme is an important strategy to expand the reach of the Programme, and the evaluation found that the Programme's influence goes beyond the direct reach of its resources, partners and geographical areas of implementation. At global and regional levels, the Global Programme has successfully collaborated with international non-governmental organizations, academia and countries to advocate successfully for increased international commitment to end child marriage. This has translated into greater accountability by countries, which is visible in programme countries. The Programme's collective advocacy and technical support at the regional level have also strengthened the efforts of regional bodies to address child marriage.

32. At the country level, catalytic effects expanded the reach of the Programme, particularly in those Global Programme countries that have adequate capacities (technical, operational, financial, partnerships, etc.) to leverage public resources. Further, joint programming and programme alignment in some countries expanded the reach and effect of the Global Programme beyond what the programe could achieve on its own.

33. Catalytic effects were also seen in terms of UNFPA and UNICEF making their human and financial resources available to support the Programme in critical ways, such as through co-financing initiatives, provision of technical support, and partnerships to expand the reach of the Global Programme. In addition, Global Programme tools and resources have been utilized by UNFPA and UNICEF offices beyond the direct programme countries, and by the global community beyond Global Programme partners.

E. Linkages with other sectors

34. The Global Programme has strengthened the capacity and reach of sectoral systems to expand delivery points for adolescent health, child protection and gender-based violence services, as well as gender-responsive education systems. The Global Programme mobilized communities, families and traditional leaders as agents of change to create a supportive environment and contribute to changing social and gender norms. The Programme also mobilized women- and youth-led organizations to advocate for and influence national policies to end child marriage, although the number of civil society organizations with adequate capacity is limited. The Programme has also made progress supporting and advocating for the establishment of favourable legal and policy environments that aim to comprehensively address child marriage. However, thematic convergence with social protection and empowerment initiatives and programmes is still limited.

35. In several countries, the Global Programme was successful in strengthening the health sector by improving the capacities, skills and knowledge of staff and improving access to adolescent-responsive health services. The strengthening of child protection and gender-based violence systems led to increased capacity and reach. The Global Programme contributed to creating an enabling environment for changing harmful norms and practices around child marriage through promoting dialogue, awareness-raising and consensus-building with communities, families and traditional and religious leaders. However, in some cases, messaging remained focused on delaying

marriage to the legal age rather than empowering or increasing agency for girls and women.

36.   Poverty and lack of economic opportunity are central drivers of child marriage, and accordingly, in some countries, the Global Programme established partnerships to support adolescent social protection, poverty reduction and empowerment. There is evidence of success, such as providing school subsidies and incentives, vocational training and start-up funds. However, most of these interventions had a limited focus on economic empowerment, career counselling, entrepreneurship and other income-generating activities, with little linkage to social protection schemes. In addition, social protection and economic empowerment interventions are resource-intensive and require partnerships with organizations that have the required funding and expertise, and these resources were not always readily available.

F.   Humanitarian and fragile contexts

37.   The Global Programme has been responsive to humanitarian, fragile and crisis contexts, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, but has yet to fully tailor the theory of change, or programming strategies such as the gender-transformative approach, to humanitarian or nexus contexts.

38.   The Global Programme adapted well to the COVID-19 pandemic, developing effective strategies to reach communities in times of confinement. Adaptation to emerging humanitarian contexts was more varied (and reactive) based on country specificities and the nature of the crisis. In some countries, the Global Programme remained focused on delivering development-type interventions. In others, the Programme tried to address emerging needs within specific humanitarian settings. The Global Programme produced a technical guide on programming in humanitarian crises; however, more work is needed to support countries to adapt to evolving contexts. Reflections around adaptations of the Programme to fragility have started, but preparedness measures and strategies are yet to be developed in most countries where the risk of humanitarian crisis is rising. Within nexus and humanitarian contexts, adapted intervention strategies must ensure that they include the most marginalized groups. Humanitarian and nexus programming also requires leveraging existing resources and programmes, possibly through new partnerships and approaches. The successful adaptations witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic show that such innovation is possible; similar strategies need to be applied for humanitarian and nexus programming. Better documentation of successful intervention strategies, as well as evidence on what is not working, would support the Programme going forward.

G.   Evidence generation and programme monitoring

39.   Evidence generation, use and dissemination has improved significantly and has influenced global advocacy and programming. However, there is a lack of knowledge on what works to end child marriage within specific contexts and beneficiary groups. The Programme results framework and guidance on indicators have allowed for regular standardized reporting on progress and results at output level. However, outcome-level change measurement is still weak, though in-country efforts have begun to make improvements in this area. The information sources used to measure outcome-level indicators are external and irregular, and this affects the logical connection to higher-level results in the results framework.

40.   The Programme made important strides in advancing the research agenda and improving data quality and tools for evidence generation at all levels through partnerships and developing technical capacities to generate high-quality evidence

and learning. The Programme leveraged global and regional partnerships such as the Strategic Technical Assistance for Research initiative to support the generation, synthesis and uptake of high-quality evidence by policymakers, practitioners and researchers. Similarly, the Global Programme has created the Child Marriage Research to Action Network in partnership with Girls Not Brides to promote research uptake. Research on adaptations, particularly during COVID-19, played an important role in informing advocacy and strategic programme direction. However, evidence generation on certain relevant themes and contexts, such as engaging men and boys, interventions in humanitarian contexts, and the impact of climate change on child marriage, has been limited. There are also gaps in evidence generation related to systems strengthening.

H.   Programme efficiency

41.   The evaluation found clear efficiencies gained from joint working (coordination and management) between UNFPA and UNICEF at global, regional and country levels, including increased complementarity and reduced duplication in areas where common approaches were used. However, in some cases, this relied largely on the willingness and commitment of individuals, rather than on systems. This may pose challenges if staff rotate or do not appreciate the value of a collaborative approach, or if the guidance provided was not utilized. Overall, coordination through joint programming, monitoring and evaluation, joint assessments and research has led to efficiencies, particularly when both agencies are working in the same geographical area. However, weaknesses were observed in some cases and, at the subnational level, with parallel coordination mechanisms and siloed implementation.

42.   Utilization rates suggest that the Global Programme made efficient use of its financial resources. However, the Programme was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to disruption of activities and reallocation of funds. Some programme countries that had slow utilization rates of programme funds faced challenges to receive additional funds, which affected programming. At the regional level, the Programme faced challenges in terms of low budget utilization, which, among other things, could be related to the relatively lower staff time allocated to the Programme. To address challenges in timeliness and predictability of funds, as well as to leverage existing opportunities, some countries mobilized their own funding to complement the funds made available through the Programme.

43.   In terms of human resources, the Global Programme faced staff shortages in some countries and regions, including periods with inadequate staff skills and capacities to implement the gender-transformative approach. Leveraging existing staff to deliver the Global Programme has increased efficiency and reduced the financial burden on programming. However, it has also increased the amount of work that staff are required to do in addition to their other responsibilities, which may affect programme implementation. Overall, the evaluation found that available human and financial resources were not always commensurate with the ambition of the Programme.

I.   Sustainability

44.   The Global Programme systematically integrated its interventions into the institutional contexts where it operated. Emphasis was placed on systems strengthening through capacity-building, strengthening of the legislative environment, and generation and dissemination of evidence, which has increased the potential for ownership and sustainability of programme interventions.

45.   This approach achieved notable results in countries where Governments have shown strong commitment to ending child marriage, and where strong systems are in place at national and subnational levels. Good practices were observed by the evaluation, such as the integration of child marriage into the performance monitoring systems of Governments. The Global Programme has also invested in and collaborated with other programmes (for example, the Spotlight Initiative) to promote synergies with Global Programme interventions at individual, family and community levels. In terms of sustainability, however, there are few measures in place to reduce Governments' financial and technical dependency on the Global Programme. Although several Governments have committed funding in national budget lines, limited funding at subnational level, in particular, remains a challenge to the sustainability of child marriage interventions, and capacities are not strong enough to sustain or scale up successful interventions.

IV.   Recommendations

46.   **Recommendation 1: Contextualize the global theory of change for national and subnational contexts and for specific populations.** The breadth, ambition and modalities of the Programme must be adapted to the resources, capacities and other contextual characteristics of the countries in which it operates. Depending on the context and the resources available, country offices may have to weigh the balance between breadth and depth, deciding whether to invest in reaching specific populations of at-risk girls or in scaling up promising or effective approaches more broadly. This could be done integrating a "reality check" assessment of the Programme through phase III, examining drivers of child marriage for population subgroups, to validate the country-adapted theory of change and tools, and to assess the programme targeting, strategies and approaches, and implementation.

47.   This prioritization should follow an inclusive consultative process between UNFPA, UNICEF and donor and implementing partners, with national- and subnational-level representation. This prioritization should include due consideration of the necessary conditions for geographically based programmatic convergence, which is critical to addressing the intersectional needs of adolescent girls. Implementing partners and counterparts from both agencies should engage in the consultation process and have a clear understanding of the final country-level theory of change and the priority interventions selected. This undertaking from partners could expand opportunities for holistic and efficient implementation, especially if implementing partners exchange information on interventions and contribute to major updates or revisions done through phase III.

48.   The adaptation of the theory of change should make use of available evidence to identify the interventions and approaches that are to be scaled up. It is important to generate, use and regularly update evidence on the needs of adolescent girls at national and subnational levels, including the particular needs of girls in urban areas vs. rural areas (going beyond the prevalence figures of child marriage), and for girls with specific vulnerability profiles (e.g. social minorities, girls with disabilities, those who are pregnant or married). Up-to-date evidence on the evolving situation and drivers of child marriage at the subnational level and for specific vulnerable populations is particularly relevant for effective programming. If quality evidence is not available, there should be budgeted plans to generate timely evidence to inform priority interventions and strategies. The adapted theory of change and any subsequent revisions should be documented throughout the implementation period of phase III. The adapted theory of change should be accompanied by an adapted monitoring and results framework for the country, including at the subnational level. The adapted results framework should, however, still allow aggregation of results at

the global level for consolidated reporting on key standardized output and outcome indicators.

49. **Recommendation 2: Make the Programme more agile and adaptive for humanitarian and other complex contexts.** The Global Programme has developed normative and technical tools and guidance to support programme adaptation in crisis contexts. To make these ongoing adaptation processes more agile, countries will need enhanced capacities to contextualize programming approaches and to adapt existing tools to their humanitarian and fragile contexts. Timely adaptation is important in order to ensure that the Programme can respond to needs as they arise and access humanitarian funding. To this end, a select set of good practices in adapting Global Programme tools and process should be identified and made available to all Global Programme countries (and beyond). This should also include information on what is not working as intended. Good practices and existing tools that are relevant might be identified and adapted from other programmes, including from the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation. Technical support should be made available to country offices to adapt the Global Programme guiding documents and tools to each context. The adaptation should be considered in emergency preparedness and risk management planning to improve effiency in programming including the use of Global Programme resources. Advocacy with key actors in emergency preparedness and response, within the two Global Programme agencies as well as externally, would facilitate the integration of prevention and response to child marriage in the humanitarian response – for example, by making it visible in accountability mechanisms and tools, cluster monitoring and reporting processes.

50. **Recommendation 3: Sustain and increase programme effectiveness, and deepen the gender-transformative approach and expand it in the countries where it is nascent.** The evaluation recommends developing and using light tools to measure the institutionalization of gender-transformative programming, the capacities of implementing partners and, eventually, the change in norms and empowerment of adolescent girls. The Global Programme should continue expanding comprehensive sexuality education and life skills education within government structures, mechanisms and frameworks to ensure continuity and expand reach. It should also further integrate men and boys at all levels to create new models of positive masculinity, building on good practices identified in the evaluation on how to retain the engagement of men and boys. The Programme should continue to engage with community and religious leaders to influence social and gender norm change and increase the focus on the discrepancies between customary or traditional and legal provisions to prevent child marriage. Eventually, the Global Programme should open an internal programme dialogue to identify and discuss unintended consequences of the enforcement of laws that limit the age of marriage in particular contexts, where new vulnerabilities for girls and their families are added, and work to address those.

51. **Recommendation 4: Make further strategic and ambitious use of the Global Programme's potential to accelerate the elimination of child marriage globally.** Continue using the Programme's global and regional position of influence to strategically contribute to accelerating the elimination of child marriage globally. The Global Programme should build further on its proven and acknowledged influence beyond the Global Programme countries and convening capacity of key regional and global partners, and demonstrated ability to galvanize and influence the generation and use of evidence on child marriage at global and regional levels. It should leverage opportunities with donors and particularly private sector actors, including at the national level, to strengthen partnerships, and also focus explicitly on humanitarian contexts.

52.   **Recommendation 5: Strengthen coordination and partner capacity and improve resource mobilization and flexible use of funds for increased efficiency.** The existing coordination mechanisms between agencies should be reviewed, with the aim of further facilitating the Programme's geographic convergence, particularly at the subnational level. As part of this process, it will be important to consider the role of partners and their capacities, as well as the complementarities and roles of both agencies at the subnational level. The Global Programme should continue to identify opportunities and mobilize additional funding for the Programme, making visible its successes and emphasizing its catalytic effect and global reach. Agile support should be provided to countries to mobilize their own resources, for example, by generating quality, standardized and contextualized information products about the Global Programme to facilitate resource mobilization initiatives.

53.   **Recommendation 6: Generate more evidence on what works in programme contexts and utilize it.** The Programme should expand and deepen the focus at the country level on generating and using evidence to understand what works in different contexts, especially at subnational and community levels. The Global Programme global results framework and monitoring and reporting system should be enhanced and refined, with a stronger focus on learning. The intervention monitoring systems could also include provisions to identify and learn from outcome-level change. Impact evaluation and process evaluation of strategic interventions, including in humanitarian situations, should be undertaken to enhance learning. Programme budgets should include costing for monitoring, evaluation and data generation from the outset.

54.   **Recommendation 7: Systematically integrate the Programme's work with the social protection sector and advocate for the strengthening of public finance management for the empowerment of adolescent girls.** The evaluation recommends expanding existing Global Programme thematic convergence to systematically include social protection interventions such as cash transfer programmes, and to advocate for national and particularly subnational budget allocations and spending on goods and social services critical to the empowerment of adolescent girls and the prevention of child marriage.

55.   **Recommendation 8: Elaborate sustainability plans in each country, jointly with implementing partners and counterparts.** This process should begin with the development of sustainability plans for select interventions at the subnational level, prioritized according to relevance in terms of investment, change potential, or other criteria of criticality. Building on the learnings from these experiences, sustainability plans should then be undertaken at the national level. The resulting sustainability plans should be included in the multi-year workplans of the Global Programme, incorporating indicators and benchmarks to assess progress in the development and implementation of the plans.

56.   The potential for sustainability should be included as one of the key criteria to inform prioritization of investments, strategies and approaches for the Programme during the planning of phase III and subsequent reviews. For example, the Programme should prioritize institutionalized systems-strengthening interventions, which are delivered through existing service delivery systems (comprehensive sexuality education, life skills development, sexual and reproductive health and rights-related services, etc.), and which match demand or where demand is also promoted.

V. Draft decision

The Executive Board

1.   *Takes note* of the evaluation of UNICEF social protection responses towards universal child benefits, its summary (E/ICEF/2024/3) and its management response (E/ICEF/2024/4);

2.   *Also takes note* of the evaluation of Phase II (2020–2023) of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, its summary (E/ICEF/2024/5) and its management response (E/ICEF/2024/6).

Annex

Evaluation of phase II (2020–2023) of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage

1.   Due to space limitations, the joint evaluation of phase II (2020–2023) of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage is not contained within the present annex.

2.   The report is available on the UNICEF Evaluation Office website: https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/reports#/.

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