

Innocenti-GORaf

Update on the context and trends

In 2023, children's lives continued to be significantly affected by great challenges: Children lived through the impact of disrupted education, widened socioeconomic gaps and weaknesses in health care system – weaknesses exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They experienced the effects of persistent food insecurity, the energy crisis, challenges to democracy and child rights, factionalism, stress on the multilateral system and dangers caused by the fragmentation of the internet. Lives and families were shattered by conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, the Sahel and Gaza, earthquakes in the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye, and gang violence in Haiti. These crises and challenges emphasized the need for UNICEF to adapt swiftly to protect children's rights amid evolving challenges. Despite these hurdles, there was progress and hope.

Concerns about child poverty prompted calls to safeguard vulnerable families. Persistent food insecurity drew attention to the need for climate adaptation and food system reforms. There was increased attention on need reforms in financial flows to developing countries and renewed focus on climate finance and debt relief. Social movements led by young people and women resiliently countered threats to democracy. Addressing children's rights and concerns offered opportunities for common ground in a fractured world. And vast digital disparities for children, prompted a renewed push for openness, fairness and inclusion.

These challenges and opportunities drove the UNICEF Innocenti research and foresight agenda throughout 2023. The office conducted comprehensive research and used foresight methods, such as horizon scanning, trend analysis and scenario development, to set the agenda for children's rights. UNICEF Innocenti informed decision-making through its diverse array of reports, analyses and policy papers, which collectively formed a dynamic library of resources. The office also facilitated platforms for debate, advocacy and meaningful youth engagement, addressing a broad spectrum of child rights issues. Through these efforts, the office actively shaped discussions and policies, ultimately promoting the well-being and rights of children worldwide.

Aligning with UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the SDGs and within the realm of social and economic policy research, UNICEF Innocenti identified key trends, notably the global shift towards innovative models, such as 'cash plus' schemes and Universal Child Benefits. The office is actively researching their feasibility, financing and impacts, with a specific focus on shock-adaptive social protection programmes. UNICEF Innocenti also placed emphasis on building an investment case for social protection programmes, underlining how they are crucial for sustainable and inclusive development.

In education, UNICEF Innocenti research addressed global challenges, with a focus on learning inequalities, children with disabilities and gender disparities. Collaborating with stakeholders worldwide, the research delved into positive deviant practices, equitable teacher allocation and barriers faced by female school leaders. Innovative digital learning programmes and technology's role in improving educational outcomes were also explored.

The evolving global landscape, marked by crises, highlighted the protection challenges facing 43.4 million displaced children. UNICEF Innocenti played a crucial role in generating evidence across areas such as migration and displacement, violence prevention, harmful practices, child labour, and gender inequalities. The office's digital engagement and protection research was adapted to better understand children's experiences with evolving technologies. It prioritized understanding online risks, combating

sexual exploitation and collaborating with corporate partners on positive contributions of digital play. In 2023, UNICEF Innocenti expanded its network of partners in foresight analysis, collaborating with the Atlantic Council and the Pardee Center for International Futures. With this inclusive approach, UNICEF Innocenti sought input globally, with active participation from regional offices, enriching to enrich outlook analyses. Growing interest in foresight within the United Nations system affirmed UNICEF Innocenti's crucial role in shaping the future landscape.

UNICEF Innocenti's work on ethics in evidence recognizes the importance of evidence while acknowledging that generating it can pose potential risks to the safety, well-being and rights of children and families. Particularly for sensitive issues, or for marginalized groups, evidence generation activities can pose challenges. Demand for support in methods to ethically generating evidence has grown organization-wide, reflecting recent trends. This demand is amplified by the complexity of the issues that require new methodologies. Growing interest in participatory evidence involving children and young people highlights a need to invest in providing appropriate tools to both the offices, and young people, to undertake this work safely. The adoption of artificial intelligence necessitates a deeper understanding of ethical risks and has presented opportunities to influence broader organizational practices, unifying language and messaging on common issues like consent at the field level.

Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF Innocenti plays a pivotal role in equipping thought leaders, policy, and decision makers with evidence to advance child rights. This is achieved through comprehensive research addressing both persistent challenges and emerging issues, drawing from primary and secondary data sources that capture the perspectives of children and families. Employing foresight techniques the office shapes the child-centred agenda. Its contributions to informed decision-making are evident in its diverse array of reports, analyses, and policy papers, which form a dynamic library of resources. Additionally, UNICEF Innocenti fosters platforms for debate, advocacy, and meaningful youth engagement, addressing a broad spectrum of child rights issues. Through these efforts, the office strives to actively shape discussions and policies, promoting the well-being and rights of children worldwide.

In 2023, UNICEF Innocenti published 111 research and evidence products, including 10 major publications. Our publications received citations in 276 policy documents from 89 different sources worldwide, including IGOs, governments, and think tanks and in 17 languages. Details of the key results in 2023 are given below.

UNICEF's flagship publication The "State of the World's Children 2023: For Every Child, Vaccination" report delved into the reasons behind the significant decline in routine vaccination and outlined the necessary steps for the global community to ensure that no child is left behind. This report played a pivotal role in launching UNICEF's Global Advocacy Strategy on Immunization, achieving unparalleled coverage and making a substantial impact. The report garnered widespread attention, accumulating over 4500 media mentions and attracting 2.3 million website viewers, setting a new record for the highest-ever coverage of a UNICEF report. To provide tailored support at regional and country levels, seven Regional Briefs were developed, addressing specific content relevant to different regions and country offices. Additionally, an Immunization convening event was organized, bringing together UNICEF colleagues, key stakeholders (including Gavi, WHO, BMGF, USAID), and academics. This collaborative effort aimed to formulate policy asks for reaching zero-dose children, emphasizing the importance of collective action and cooperation in addressing vaccination challenges. Following the publication of the State of the World's Children Report, which focused on the reasons too many children are still under vaccinated, UNICEF Innocenti produced an evidence synthesis report on "What Works to Increase Uptake of Childhood Immunization." The findings of this report were featured at Regional Immunization Technical Advisory Group meetings of national immunization

program managers in Europe and Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and East and Southern Africa regions.

Report Card 18: Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth examined the state of child poverty in 43 high-income and upper-middle-income countries within the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The report presented data and evaluated the advancements, or lack thereof, made by these nations in the ongoing quest to eradicate child poverty. The Report Card not only highlighted the successes achieved by certain countries but also deliberated on additional measures that could be undertaken to address the challenge set by the Sustainable Development Goals: the eradication of poverty in all its forms, everywhere – even within affluent nations. The report garnered significant attention on social media, indicative of its relevance and importance. Initial responses to the Report Card included its utilization in policy advocacy efforts and government debates in Slovenia, Iceland, Luxembourg, and the United Kingdom. The widespread acknowledgment and application of the findings underscore the report's potential to influence tangible actions and policies aimed at alleviating child poverty on both national and international levels.

The report “Too Little, Too Late” is the first attempt to look at how public policies for children are organized in high-, middle- and low-income countries across the globe, to see what can be learned about optimal type and timing of public spending for children, and to set a baseline on which to build better child policy portfolios. Drawing from internationally validated databases on child policy expenditure (education, social protection, and social services), population statistics, school enrolment data and macro-economic conditions, the study produced age-spending profiles to map country child policy portfolios across the life course. It examined public spending on children by age in 84 countries (58% of children and young people worldwide). The report finds that public expenditures on children in the early years in 15 of the 84 countries are very low and inadequate. In more than half of the countries studied, public expenditures on children are greater in late childhood and youth at the expense of early childhood. An expert meeting was convened by UNICEF Innocenti in March 2023 to discuss these findings and recommend global action.

Data Must Speak (DMS) Positive Deviance Research being co-created and co-implemented in 14 countries have informed Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Capacity Strengthening Grants or Partnership Compacts in Cote D’Ivoire, Nepal, Ghana, Togo, and Lao PDR. Evidence from Lao PDR, Togo and Mali demonstrates that head teachers at positive deviant schools engage more with teachers and parents, including in decision-making, and provide more instructional supervision and pedagogical support to teachers. In Kosovo^[1], Guinea and Mexico, evidence generated on the Learning Passport informed national digital education plans. In Paraguay and Uruguay, evidence generated on the Accessible Digital Textbooks (ADT) informed the national scale up of the programme.

The What Works in Pre-Primary Education Provision report was presented at the Comparative International Education Society (CIES) conference and to Plan International’s ECE Hub. While in Zambia under the Teachers for All (T4A) research project, findings were used by the Ministry of Education for teacher recruitment planning. In Madagascar, data was used to inform the GPE Compact. In Angola, evidence was used by the Ministry of Education to target a new teacher training to high needs municipalities. Besides, the Learning is for Everyone (LiFE) research was launched in 2023 to explore whether education systems are disability-inclusive in Cambodia, Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger and Paraguay.

Women in Learning Leadership (WiLL), a joint research initiative with UNESCO-IIEP, examines the under-representation of women in school leadership and generates evidence on the best practices and behaviours of school leaders that can improve learning outcomes and gender equality. In 2023, WiLL expanded to five countries (Chad, Mali, Ghana, Madagascar and Benin). A regional analysis from 14 Francophone countries demonstrates significant gender disparities in school leadership. Additional regional analyses are underway for Latin America and the Caribbean and Southeast Asia.

Two large-scale, multi-year research programs, namely Evidence on Educational Strategies to Address Child Labour in South Asia and Gender Responsive and Age-Sensitive Social Protection (GRASSP), concluding in 2024, facilitated collaborations with consortium partners to amplify impacts at both country and global levels.

A mixed-methods study on Child and Youth Experiences of Migration Displacement and Return in Afghanistan and a study on Including Refugee Learners in National Education Systems on migration and displacement were completed. These studies yielded actionable insights, with findings directly shaping programs like the 'Protecting Afghan Children on the Move' initiative in Afghanistan and informing Child Protection strategies in planning cycles. Moreover, ongoing research in Pakistan underscores a commitment to evidence-based guidance for national governments, particularly regarding child protection amid forced deportations and displacement. Collaborations with organizations such as the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move and the University of Virginia led to cross-sectoral gatherings addressing data challenges related to climate-linked displacement and child mobility. This collaboration facilitated expert workshops and technical assistance, in Latin America and the Caribbean, informing UNICEF's Child Protection agenda for migrant children and families.

Qualitative research across four countries bolstered the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children's forthcoming report to the Human Rights Council, augmenting a diverse portfolio of publications. Further efforts were directed towards supporting the implementation of UNICEF's Child Protection Strategy 2021–2030, emphasizing prevention through tackling social and behavioral drivers, with notable outputs including evidence briefs on gender transformative parenting programs and ongoing studies in the Middle East and North Africa region. Besides, the team contributed to The Lancet Commission on Gender-based Violence and Maltreatment of Young People, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative Leadership Council, To Zero Working together to end childhood sexual violence, The Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse, and others. The STAR Initiative provided extensive technical assistance to advance progress on ending harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation, while efforts to address gender inequalities in care responsibilities were highlighted through publications and policy briefs, setting the stage for continued analytical work in 2024.

The Disrupting Harm project, aligned with UNICEF's child protection mandate, focuses on safeguarding children in the digital realm, particularly combatting online child sexual exploitation and abuse. In partnership with INTERPOL and ECPAT International, the research involves extensive primary data collection involving children, families, and duty bearers within the child protection system, aiming to understand the impact of digital transformation on children's well-being and rights. In 2023, project recommendations influenced legislative amendments and national action plans in several countries (Thailand, Kenya, Tanzania, Indonesia, and Malaysia). The project expanded to 12 new countries, collaborating with governments and stakeholders to strengthen child protection services and enhance UNICEF's capacity for ethical evidence generation. Concurrently, collaborations with the LEGO Group and LEGO Foundation explore the positive impact of digital play experiences on child well-being through participatory research activities globally, with findings scheduled for a final report launch in early 2024. The Digital Engagement and Protection team also introduced a futures-focused workstream in 2023. This workstream is designed to explore new challenges and opportunities associated with digital technologies. It involves supporting research and consultations on emerging issues, including Generative AI. Additionally, from a policy perspective, the team aims to consolidate findings and disseminate them to global audiences.

UNICEF Innocenti also worked with key partners outlining the strengths, limitations and opportunities of applying behavioral sciences-based approaches in the Global South (Association for Psychological Science) and co-led the organization of the UN Behavioural Science Week 2023, where Under-

Secretary-General Guy Ryder acknowledged UNICEF's BIRD Lab in his opening remarks.

The office expanded disability inclusion research following its commitment at the 2022 Global Disability Summit, aligning with the Disability and Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS). Initiatives included a research prioritization exercise engaging 300 global experts, forming the basis for the Global Research Agenda for Children with Disabilities, advocating for inclusive interventions. UNICEF Innocenti's commitment led to a centralized repository of global research and the introduction of the Flex-Yang Visiting Research Fellowship Programme, fostering inclusivity by inviting researchers with disabilities to work in Florence. Partnering with Perkins Access and University College London's EPPI Centre, the world's first accessible evidence and gap map (EGM) was launched, complementing the 2022 report, "Inclusion Matters."

The initiative to strengthen ethics in evidence generation at UNICEF focused on integrating ethical principles into workflows and over 140 queries related to research, evaluation, and data projects were addressed, with 83% resolved within 48 hours, and the internal SharePoint site was revamped to enhance usability and highlight resources on frequently asked questions. Progress was made towards updating the Ethics in Evidence Generation Procedures to embed a principle-based approach and provide input to other sectors' work, such as the Gender U-report playbook and Data disaggregation guidelines for children on the move. UNICEF Innocenti also contributed to the development of UNICEF's strategic framework on AI and engaged in inter-agency networks like the UN Bioethics Committee and the UNEG Working Group on Ethics.

In terms of foresight and anticipatory policy, UNICEF Innocenti's efforts significantly influenced the organization across various levels, the "Prospects for Children in the Polycrisis – A 2023 Global Outlook 2023" report garnered substantial attention and sparked dialogue within UNICEF, particularly during the Global Leadership Meeting. The "Loss and Damage" paper played a crucial role in advocating for a child rights focus in the global discourse on the Loss and Damage Fund activation at COP28. The report on "Accelerating 'Green' School-to-Work Transitions" provided a new framework for understanding such transitions, and an overview of what policymakers can do to accelerate green livelihood opportunities for young people. The report emphasized the importance of supporting young people as they pursue green livelihoods.

The ongoing work on trade is gaining attention and fostering joint efforts both within UNICEF and with partners, shaping the discourse for the African Union Summit. Furthermore, the United Nations High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) Principles for future generations, endorsed by the UN Chief Executive Board (CEB), have influenced the strategic direction of several UN agencies. Maintaining a learner's mindset, UNICEF Innocenti responded to the increasing demand for foresight across organizational levels and developed a foresight strategy. The growing interest underscored the necessity of enhancing the team's foresight capacity, understanding the approaches of other UN agencies (e.g., consulting the UNDP Foresight team), and crucially, having a foresight expert on board. The masterclasses offered by UNESCO on foresight methodologies benefitted the team and integrated these tools into the outlook analysis. The "Outlook 2023" and "Outlook 2024," integrated various foresight tools, such as 3-horizons scanning, futures wheel, 200-year present, and 2x2 scenarios, among others. Besides, a forward-looking report on the emerging metaverse, extended reality, and its implications for children was developed.

In the area of youth engagement, UNICEF Innocenti led the youth engagement and dialogue at the UNICEF Global Leadership Meeting. It also supported the participation of refugee-youth led organizations (RYLO) in discussions focusing on displacement and gender issues in collaboration with the Gender Rights and Protection research team. The team is also working with RYLOs to underscore the imperative for increased attention, funding, and the utilization of RYLOs' expertise and experiences in research initiatives. The team made significant contributions to the Global Outlook Report through the Youth Foresight Fellowship, introducing the first-ever youth-authored chapter in

the report, specifically focusing on the futures of democracy. Another endeavour was UNICEF's submission to UNFCCC on child input to the Loss and Damage Transition Fund and forging a meaningful partnership with UNDP on the Youth for Climate initiative.

In addition to these efforts, the team actively facilitated and published youth-led content, encompassing blogs, videos, and the Our Future Pledge report. A noteworthy achievement was the collaboration with UN Global Pulse at the Dubai Future Forum to create the Youth Foresight Playbook. This playbook is designed to assist governments and multilateral organizations in engaging young people in foresight, thereby enhancing anticipatory capacity, and strengthening policy and decision-making. The team also successfully launched the second cohort of youth foresight fellows in collaboration with UNICEF Country Offices, National Committees, and the Office of the Commissioner for Future Generations of Wales. The Innocenti Youth Network experienced substantial growth, expanding to over 2500 members and the team established the role of Senior Fellow, integrating it as an integral part of the Youth Engagement and Strategy (YES) team, demonstrating commitment to sustaining and advancing youth-focused initiatives.

[1]As per UNSC resolution 1244

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Dynamic Outlook process: The shift towards viewing Outlook as a dynamic process rather than a static product proved instrumental in enhancing inclusivity and early engagement. By involving diverse stakeholders from the outset, UNICEF Innocenti was able to tap into a broader range of perspectives, particularly from the Global South. However, the increased demand highlighted the need for adaptive planning and realistic expectations, emphasizing the importance of product dissemination and uptake strategies. Furthermore, sustaining momentum requires additional support, such as offering internships to graduate students to foster capacity building and ensure continuity.

Regular interactions enhance collaboration: Fragmentation of responsibilities and territoriality among divisions/units/sections can hinder collaboration and lead to duplication of efforts. Engagement initiatives by UNICEF Innocenti to foster collaboration across different areas, such as Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies and Child Protection, have been pivotal. These engagements foster collaboration and ensure alignment of efforts towards common goals. Strengthening collaborations with academic institutions presents strategic opportunities, although efforts should ensure inclusivity across global regions.

Evidence generation strategy and partnerships: A blended approach to evidence generation, coupled with partnership-based dissemination strategies, enhances research uptake, and mitigates risks associated with sensitive themes. Centering research within global collaborations amplifies visibility and impact and aligning evidence strategies with established frameworks provides clear direction and enhances contributions to priority areas.

Co-creation for impact policy change: Co-creation with governments and stakeholders is essential for maximizing research utilization and impact on policy and programme changes. Strategic mapping of policy moments at the country level is indispensable for driving meaningful change.

Prioritization for impact: It is critical to prioritize projects and products to maximize impact. One-off activities or convenings with no concrete results or outcomes should be avoided. Emphasizing projects that demonstrate tangible impact in the field ensures resources are allocated efficiently and effectively.

Strengthening demand-driven evidence: The impact of research and foresight activities must be

visible in the field. Strengthening demand-driven evidence and research processes ensures that projects address the needs and priorities of stakeholders, ultimately leading to more impactful outcomes.

Standardization of research materials for replication and adaptation: There is a need to streamline study timelines and optimize human resource allocation through the standardization of research materials. The social and economic policy research team made strategic investments in standardizing methodological approaches, such as impact evaluation and qualitative research, alongside refining data collection tools and ethical protocols for research aligned with thematic areas (e.g., impact evaluations, political economy analysis). By ensuring consistency in data collection instruments and modules utilized in household surveys, encompassing areas like cash transfers and child wellbeing research, the team facilitated easy replication and adaptation for diverse contexts. This initiative not only enhanced operational efficiencies but also yielded standardized materials beneficial for wider organizational use. Moving forward, this endeavor remains integral to our ongoing efforts, including enhancing post-distribution monitoring mechanisms and conducting secondary research on public finance, exemplified by our investment case guide.

Flexibility and adaptability in funding: One significant lesson learned is the importance of securing flexible funding for research and foresight endeavours. The ability to respond swiftly to emergent situations and conduct rapid-response analysis is essential for informing effective interventions and addressing urgent needs. However, the lack of or limited flexible funding severely limits our capacity to adapt to unforeseen circumstances or emergencies, hindering our ability to provide timely insights. Moving forward, we recognize the necessity of advocating for and securing flexible funding mechanisms that enable greater adaptability. By fostering a culture of innovation and agility within the office, we can strengthen our capacity to navigate the dynamic landscape of humanitarian and development work to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging challenges and opportunities.

Communication for risk mitigation: Teams gained valuable insights into the critical importance of managing expectations and fostering transparent communication with key stakeholders, including country offices, government partners, and donors. Regular dialogue and consultations emerged as indispensable tools for maintaining transparency regarding study timelines, research progress, and encountered challenges. By actively engaging in open communication, we successfully addressed and mitigated risks, particularly in conflict-affected regions like Ethiopia and Burkina Faso. Implementing risk mitigation strategies, such as adjusting timelines and replacing study areas, enabled us to navigate obstacles effectively and ensure the uninterrupted progression of data collection efforts. This experience also underscored the significance of stakeholder engagement and adaptive capacity in achieving project success. Moving forward, we remain committed to maintaining open lines of communication, fostering collaborative relationships, and implementing agile strategies to address challenges swiftly and effectively.

Investing in internal ethics resources: Recognizing the increasing complexity of ethical issues and the demand for support, substantial focus has been directed towards strengthening internal resources. Initiatives such as enhancing training offerings and optimizing knowledge-sharing platforms like SharePoint have been prioritized. By consolidating investment in these resources, the goal is to empower staff to autonomously address routine support requests, thereby enabling senior advisor to focus more on addressing complex issues. Early indications suggest positive outcomes, as evidenced by a reduction in helpdesk queries in recent months. Continued investment in internal resources is crucial for maintaining operational efficiency and effectiveness in addressing emerging challenges in ethics in evidence.