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Oral report on the knowledge management and research functions of UNICEF

Background document

I. Introduction

1. The effort to strengthen research and knowledge management aims to protect the rights of children and support the achievement of development goals.
2. UNICEF has recognized strengths underpinning the effort: (a) extensive field presence in over 150 countries and good standing with various national partners; (b) close working relationships with non-governmental and civil society organizations; (c) a network of National Committees; (d) credibility in pioneering new approaches to child survival, development, protection and participation; (e) proven partnerships with centres of excellence in development policy and academic institutions; and (f) flexibility to respond to new challenges.
3. Building on these strengths, UNICEF needs to develop an integrated framework for research and knowledge management. And to fulfil its role as a global knowledge organization and effective evidence-based advocate for children, the organization needs to develop a new vision of how it acquires, generates, organizes, shares and uses child-related information and knowledge at country, regional and global levels. This vision will help UNICEF to spearhead and effectively guide the research agenda for children globally, in collaboration with partners.
4. Towards this end, the UNICEF Executive Board approved the establishment of the Office of Research (decision 2008/2). Its mandate is to provide leadership for a strategic research agenda around children and to collaborate with all parts of UNICEF to strengthen the generation and use of new knowledge in improving programmes of cooperation and policy advocacy for children.
5. The Executive Board has also called for a greater emphasis on knowledge management in order to ensure that the latest and most relevant knowledge related to children and best practice in programme implementation are rapidly available to the field in an easy-

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to-use form. UNICEF obtains much of the effective knowledge it uses by being a part of networks and communities of practice. The nurturing of more horizontal and bottom-up linkages has begun to take root, both within the organization and with external partners.

6. For this effort, UNICEF urgently needs to strengthen its ability to (a) evaluate and synthesize lessons learned; (b) capture and make use of new understanding of issues and innovation; and (c) communicate good practices and knowledge, both within the organization and to partners.

A. The research function

7. To support the revitalization of the research function, UNICEF held a consultation at the end of 2009 in Florence, Italy, seeking a wide range views in order to take stock of current efforts and to consider how best to shape future research activities. There were more than 75 participants from UNICEF staff, partners and research organizations from both within and outside the United Nations family, and National Committees for UNICEF.

8. The review's overall conclusion was that the culture of UNICEF, as an action-oriented organization, is still characterized by 'learning by doing' in ways that have not sufficiently integrated learning from research and evidence. As a result, the potential of UNICEF as a knowledge-based organization was not fully exploited.

9. Also noted was a strong demand for the systematic identification and sharing of research, both to widen access to the experience of UNICEF in different parts of the world and also to strengthen the acquisition and internalization of the findings of research carried out by others. The review underlined that noteworthy research activities are under way at different levels of the organization, which spends significant resources on research each year (estimated at \$50 million in field locations alone).

10. The review found that UNICEF carries out much research seen as important but identified important weaknesses in the way the organization currently organizes and implements research. First, a significant part of the research has uncertain value and lacks sufficient relevance to programmes and countries. Second, investments in research are often made in a fragmented way, risking duplication and missed opportunities for organizational learning. Third, a system for strategic planning and quality assurance is lacking.

11. The Innocenti Research Centre (IRC) in Florence was recognized for its contributions, particularly to the investigation of new frontiers in child protection and to work on international standards in child rights. Nevertheless, it was noted that the IRC had become too focused on children in industrialized countries and needed to build greater links to developing countries and to ensure that its work was relevant for other regions.

12. The review underlined the importance of an integrated approach to research. It strongly recommended that UNICEF – across the organization – give much higher priority to research, to the dissemination of information and to the management of knowledge, and that it establish a clear mechanism for setting research priorities.

13. The review proposed two main streams of work for the new Office of Research:

(a) In the first stream, IRC will play a renewed role as research hub and independent forum of ideas, focusing on multi-country research and interregional analysis

and creating stronger partnerships with the field. It will also initiate work on ‘next generation’ programme concerns and explore issues that are underlying determinants of children’s well-being but are yet sufficiently understood. Such areas include child injuries, children with disabilities, climate instability, conflict, globalization, urbanization and the impact of new information technologies on children. It will continue to work closely with National Committees in support of policy advocacy around child well-being in industrialized countries;

In support of making research findings more widely known and available, the Office of Research will also carry out regular and systematic overviews and syntheses of ongoing research activities of UNICEF and external partners. These will provide an ongoing, independent assessment of priorities and enable UNICEF to stimulate and support research on topics currently not well served by the research community. The overviews will also provide the Executive Director and the Global Management Team with updates on the latest thinking and new ideas that could help shape the future strategic direction of the organization.

(b) The second stream will encompass quality assurance, including standard-setting and country support for operational research, organizing intellectual exchange, and communicating and disseminating results to partners. This will be an arm of the Office of Research that will work closely with headquarters, regional office teams and country offices and focus on the linkages with developing countries.

14. With the support of the Executive Board through its decision 2009/20, significant regular (core) resources are now being allocated to the research function. This is an important development, as research work has too often been determined by the availability of other (non-core) resources rather than by the organization’s operational and programme priorities. New premises for the IRC in Florence, appropriate for an expanded research function, are being offered by the Government of Italy and are scheduled to be available to UNICEF in 2013.

15. Over the last two years, research across the organization at global and regional levels has continued to expand in key areas, including analysis of the impact of the global economic crisis on children, early child development, child poverty and inequalities, and new models of social protection. Research has also continued to inform targeted advocacy by National Committees as part of IRC’s Report Card series assessing progress on different dimensions of child well-being in rich countries.

16. The recent UNICEF report *Narrowing the Gaps to Meet the Goals* (September 2010) is an example of an intensive, applied research effort on child survival, modelling the different pathways that countries have taken in reaching the health-related Millennium Development Goals. The study found that a focus on the most deprived children and families could lead to faster progress and would also be more cost-effective. It is contributing to a growing body of knowledge on ‘what works’ in achieving the Millennium Development Goals with equity. This approach is now being expanded to other areas of the work of UNICEF.

17. In the coming period, UNICEF will give new emphasis to operational research focusing on the Goals. Central to this work will be country and regional offices, along with key partners such as national Governments, United Nations agencies, international financial

institutions, academic centres and non-governmental organizations. This effort will be actively supported by headquarters and its methodology backed up by the Office of Research.

B. Knowledge management

18. Major improvements have been made in knowledge management over the past three years. Following the UNICEF organizational review, a dedicated Information and Knowledge Management Unit was created to help lead and coordinate work in this area.

19. The Knowledge and Content Management Initiative was one of several organizational improvement initiatives established to help strengthen work related to knowledge management. Since then, global efforts have focused on strengthening knowledge management through the institutionalization of tools for more effective sharing of knowledge across the organization and with external partners.

20. An internal database of innovations, lessons learned and good practices has been established and continually updated, with the information regularly disseminated through thematic newsletters. The database includes over 900 examples from all areas of the organization's work.

21. The UNICEF website and associated newsletters also disseminate important knowledge, including lessons learned, data on women and children and evaluations. Good progress is being made on the development of an organizational taxonomy, or classification system. The UNICEF intranet has been extensively redesigned to improve access and ease of use. Web-based discussions and presentations (webinars) are now more frequent and often involve external participants. Research digests bring in the best and most recent external research on subjects of interest to UNICEF. Around 20 communities of practice – with an increasing membership (presently more than 2,000 members, some of them external) – have been established in different thematic areas of the UNICEF medium-term strategic plan.

22. Supply Division has focused on a number of knowledge management tools. These include 'Supply Faces', a collaborative discussion forum for sharing information and experiences, and the 'Innovation' site, a platform for addressing problems and solutions related to procurement and supply management. Among country examples, the Knowledge Community on Children, in India, promotes the sharing of information on policies and programmes related to children and aims to ensure that relevant knowledge and leading research is utilized.

23. DevInfo is a powerful database system for monitoring human development. This tool stores, organizes and presents data in a uniform way to facilitate the sharing of data at the country level across government departments and at the international level among agencies. Building on UNICEF's Childinfo software, DevInfo was first introduced in 2004. There are now 351 adaptations of DevInfo in 134 countries, the majority used by national statistical offices. In addition, there are more than 15 global adaptations in use by United Nations agencies. To date, about 30,000 people have been trained in the use of DevInfo.

24. Despite the wealth of available examples, however, it has often been difficult to comprehensively identify knowledge activities related to knowledge management in the field because of the lack of a systematic reporting mechanism. Now, with the inclusion of knowledge management in the UNICEF performance management framework, progress with knowledge management will be reported annually as part of annual reports. To guide

reporting and practice by staff, a number of good programme practices have been defined, and programme guidance is being updated.

25. With the growing importance of knowledge management in the work of UNICEF, the need for a knowledge management strategic framework has emerged as a high priority. The organization's first global knowledge management consultation took place in Copenhagen in October 2009 under the theme "UNICEF as a Knowledge Leader". The consultation emphasized the importance of going beyond improving knowledge management within the organization towards engaging with all stakeholders so that UNICEF would become a trusted 'knowledge broker'. The in-depth review of the medium-term strategic plan (2006-2013) highlighted the need for UNICEF to broaden its focus on knowledge management even further and to include improvement of knowledge capacity at the national level as part of the country programme of cooperation.

26. Strengthened research as well as capacities and practices in knowledge management will be essential to support the organization's focus on the most deprived and vulnerable children and families. UNICEF efforts in this regard will include the development, use and dissemination of a range of information: (a) child poverty and disparities studies; (b) disaggregated data from household surveys; (c) participatory situation analyses of children and women, conducted with partners; (d) results of studies on cost-effectiveness and marginal budgeting for bottlenecks; (e) budget and programme-impact analyses from a child and gender perspective; (f) Communication for Development research and testing with poor communities; and (g) programme evaluations in all focus areas of the medium-term strategic plan.

27. The evolving strategic knowledge management framework foresees the following roles for UNICEF:

(a) Help to build and improve national capacity for generating, using, and managing knowledge for children's rights at the country and regional levels;

(b) Be an effective knowledge broker and leverage the organization's significant convening power to foster and support dynamic exchanges of knowledge with development stakeholders and country and international counterparts;

(c) Continue to improve knowledge management within UNICEF and strengthen the organization's ability to generate high-quality knowledge by enabling staff to better access information – internally (through improved systems and policies) and externally (through improved retrieval of global state-of-the-art knowledge).

28. While progress has been significant, much remains to be done. The Internet has made available huge amounts of information related to children; unfortunately, UNICEF has only limited full-time resources to filter and assess this information.

C. Way forward

29. High-quality research and evidence will help the world achieve the Millennium Development Goals faster and more effectively and in a sustainable and equitable manner. This research and evidence will also help prepare for and shape the agenda for children beyond 2015.

30. Many of the prerequisites for strengthened research and knowledge management in UNICEF are now in place. Efforts in knowledge management have achieved good progress in developing the institutional tools needed to capture and disseminate knowledge and in broadening the vision of knowledge management to include development partners outside UNICEF. The Office of Research has been established but now needs to be fully staffed and integrated into the organizational structure.

31. More work also needs to be done to better coordinate the two critical functions of research and knowledge management in a streamlined and clear manner. The engagement of regional and country offices is vital so that information and best practices continue to feed into the organization and the right questions are identified and addressed in future research.

32. By strengthening its own knowledge management and research leadership and practice, UNICEF will be better positioned to foster research partnerships and networks, especially with academic institutions and with other partners in developing countries and regions.

33. In this way, UNICEF can become an increasingly effective ‘observatory’ for children and their rights, particularly for the most disadvantaged children within countries and regions. UNICEF will thereby act as a trusted broker of knowledge to which partners can contribute and on which they will depend.
