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The UNICEF evaluation policy: oral report Background note

I. Introduction

1. At its annual session of 2006, when the Executive Board reviewed the report on the evaluation function in UNICEF (E/ICEF/2006/15), it requested the secretariat to prepare a comprehensive evaluation policy for consideration by the Executive Board at its annual session in June 2007. Due to the ongoing organizational review, the secretariat requested and the Bureau of the Executive Board agreed to the postponement of consideration of the policy until January 2008. It was further requested that the Executive Board be informed in June 2007 of the main changes to come as part of the new evaluation policy.

2. This paper presents the background supporting a revision of the evaluation policy of UNICEF. It provides a summary of the decisions of the Executive Board concerning the evaluation function and key principles guiding the development of the new policy. The reports also highlights the main measures being taken to strengthen the evaluation function in UNICEF in the context of the organisational review.

II. Background

3. During its 2002 annual session, the Executive Board reviewed the report on the evaluation function in the context of the medium-term strategic plan 2002-2005 (E/ICEF/2002/10). In its decision 2002/9¹, the Board endorsed the report as “the policy statement on the evaluation function in UNICEF”.

4. This policy is in compliance with the bulletin² issued in April 2000 by the Secretary General governing the evaluation function in the United Nations. Regulation 7.2 of the bulletin states that all activities programmed shall be evaluated over a fixed period of time. Regulation 7.4 indicates that the findings of evaluation shall permit mid-course correction, if required, and be reflected in subsequent programme design, delivery and policy directives.

* E/ICEF/2007/8.

¹ E/ICEF/2002/8/Rev.1.

² ST/SGB/2000 – Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation.

5. This new comprehensive policy will be aligned with the norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations system approved by the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG)³ in April 2005. At its substantive session of 2005, the Economic and Social Council took note of the UNEG endorsement of the norms and standards as constituting a contribution to strengthening evaluation as a United Nations system function, in compliance with General Assembly resolution 59/250 of 22 December 2004⁴. UNICEF led the inter-agency drafting process of United Nations norms and standards for evaluation and its Executive Board took note of them in its decision 2006/9⁵.

6. During 2005, the Evaluation Office conducted a self-assessment using UNEG norms and standards, which identified several key strengths of the evaluation function of UNICEF: technical evaluation capabilities; intellectual independence; management of strategic evaluations; credibility to clients; participatory and human rights-based approaches; and gender-balanced evaluation teams. The principal weaknesses identified were the limited availability of human and financial resources; limited evidence that evaluation findings are used; inconsistent distillation of lessons learned; and limited opportunity for professional development.

7. In 2006, an international expert panel conducted a peer review of the evaluation function in UNICEF. The central question was whether the UNICEF evaluation function and its products are independent, credible, and useful for learning and accountability purposes, as assessed against UNEG norms and standards. The short answer to this question is a qualified 'yes'. The review concluded that the central Evaluation Office demonstrated a high level of independence and produced evaluations which are credible and useful for learning and decision-making within the organization and that the decentralized evaluation system is appropriate for the operational nature of the organization. The review also stressed that the credibility and usefulness of the Evaluation Office's functions are limited by critical gaps in resources. To realize the evaluation function's potential to strengthen accountability and organizational learning, some organizational constraints must be addressed.⁶ The peer review panel suggested a clear and comprehensive evaluation policy document, consistent with UNEG norms and standards, a more predictable budget for evaluation, additional interventions to strengthen and support field offices, and improved use of results-based management throughout the organization to strengthen the evaluation function.

8. The Executive Board, in its decision 2006/9, recalled General Assembly resolution 59/250, which stressed that national Governments have the primary responsibility for coordinating external assistance and evaluating its contribution to national priorities. It called on UNICEF to conduct evaluation of operations at the country level in close association with national Governments and to assist Governments in the development of national evaluation capacities.

³ The heads of the evaluation units of the United Nations are the members of the United Nations Evaluation Group (www.uneval.org).

⁴ See paragraph 69 of A/RES/59/250.

⁵ See paragraph 2 of decision 2006/9.

⁶ Peer Review of Evaluation Function at UNICEF, 4 May 2006.

III. The guiding principles for the evaluation function

9. The principles guiding the evaluation function in UNICEF emanate from decisions taken by the Executive Board and from the norms and standards approved by UNEG.

10. In the Secretary-General's bulletin on the regulations governing the methods of evaluation (ST/SGB/2000/8) issued on 19 April 2000, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 54/236 of 23 December 1999 and decision 54/74 of 7 April 2000, the mandate of evaluation is defined in regulation 7.1 as being:

- (a) To determine as systematically and objectively as possible the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the Organization's activities in relation to their objectives;
- (b) To enable the Secretariat and Member States to engage in systematic reflection, with a view to increasing the effectiveness of the programmes of the Organization by altering their content and, if necessary, reviewing their objectives.

11. The norms for evaluation in the United Nations system endorsed by UNEG define evaluation as:

An assessment, as systematic and impartial as possible, of an activity, project, programme, strategy, policy, topic, theme, sector, operational area, institutional performance, etc.⁷ It focuses on expected and achieved accomplishments examining the results chain, processes, contextual factors and causality, in order to understand achievements or the lack thereof. It aims at determining the relevance, impact, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the interventions and contributions of the organizations of the United Nations system. An evaluation should provide evidence-based information that is credible, reliable, and useful, enabling the timely incorporation of findings, recommendations and lessons into the decision-making processes of the organizations of the United Nations system and its members.⁸

12. The purpose of evaluation includes understanding why and the extent to which intended and unintended results are achieved, and their impact on stakeholders. Evaluation is an important source of evidence of the achievement of results and institutional performance. Evaluation is also an important contributor to building knowledge and to organizational learning. Evaluation is an important agent of change and plays a critical and credible role in supporting accountability.

13. Principles that will govern the evaluation function are as follows:

⁷ Hereinafter referred to as an "undertaking".

⁸ Norms for evaluation in the United Nations system, UNEG, 29 April 2005

- (a) Evaluation must respect the principle of universality and country-driven programming;⁹
- (b) Evaluation is to give emphasis on analyzing effectiveness and results;
- (c) It is important to preserve the decentralized nature of the evaluation system;¹⁰
- (d) Evaluation concerns must be addressed at the design stage of an intervention, with adequate resourcing set aside;¹¹
- (e) Three to five per cent of programme expenditures should be dedicated to evaluation and research;¹²
- (f) Evaluation must be conducted in an independent, impartial and transparent manner;
- (g) Evaluation must be credible and meet professional quality standards;
- (h) Evaluators must have personal and professional ethic, integrity and basic skill set in evaluation;
- (i) Whenever possible, evaluations must be undertaken in partnership with national authorities, with the United Nations system and with interested partners;¹³
- (j) Evaluation findings, recommendations and lessons must be made public and disseminated to all stakeholders concerned,
- (k) Evaluations findings of relevance to the Executive Board are to be brought to its attention.¹⁴

14. UNICEF is committed to supporting programme countries to evaluate their own programmes and to contribute to the strengthening of evaluation capacity in these countries.¹⁵

IV. Strengthening evaluation in the context of the organizational review

15. Conducted from October 2005 to May 2007, the organizational review is a broad-based strategic review to help the positioning of UNICEF for maximum impact in the future, focusing on: (a) a participatory organizational assessment to highlight strengths, weaknesses and strategic opportunities; (b) articulation of a strategic direction built upon the comparative advantages and partnership opportunities of UNICEF; and (c) an organizational design that combines cohesive structures, efficient systems and processes and robust internal capacity to deliver on the strategic vision.

16. The organizational review highlights the importance of the evaluation function in terms of the key shifts recommended to sharpen programme focus, formulation and synergy; realign structures and systems to deliver results; position of UNICEF as a global knowledge leader for children and manage for performance. Within the key shifts, the review thus offers the opportunity to strengthen the evaluation function within UNICEF.

⁹ Decision 2002/9 of the Executive Board of 7 June 2002

¹⁰ Same as above

¹¹ Decision 2006/9 of the Executive Board of 9 June 2006

¹² This principle was set in the Executive Directive CF/EXD/1993-006 of 1 June 1993 for funding from both regular and other resources.

¹³ Decision 2004/9 of the Executive Board of 11 June 2004

¹⁴ Decision 2002/9

¹⁵ Included in Decisions 2002/9, 2004/9 and 2006/9 of the Executive Board

In particular, it emphasises the importance of designing programmes for evaluability to verify the attainment of results; harnessing the rich source of knowledge that evaluations represent and ensuring its user-friendliness, contributing to the active knowledge base of the organization and the development community at large; evaluating lessons on programme and functional effectiveness as part of ensuring accountability and managing for performance.

17. Five key measures are proposed to address the weaknesses and gaps identified during the diagnostic of the organizational review and the international peer review of the evaluation function.

18. In line with the peer review, more explicit accountabilities of managers at all levels of the organization with regard to evaluation should be established. Greater emphasis should be given to increasing the use of evaluation by divisions, regional and country offices as a tool for continuous improvement, selecting evaluations for strategic focus, ensuring the quality of the evaluation process, ensuring clear evaluation findings and recommendations, with subsequent implementation and follow-up.

19. The second aims to improve the quality of evaluation supported by UNICEF at the country level. In each regional office, a position for a Senior Evaluation Officer (or equivalent senior consultancy) is recommended to provide quality assurance and support to country offices in evaluation as well as managing evaluation at the regional level. Also, in collaboration with UNEG, rosters of regional and national evaluation experts will be set up to facilitate access to evaluation expertise by country offices.

20. In line with the organizational review, the third measure intends to enhance the use of evaluation findings and lessons. To strengthen evaluation support to UNICEF as a knowledge-based organization, lessons learnt from programme implementation and evaluation should be adequately documented and disseminated.

21. Reflecting the recommendation of the organizational review, the fourth measure seeks to improve the quality of evaluation through enhanced attention to evaluability. Results-based management requires clear objective setting together with appropriate performance indicators.

22. The fifth measure responds to the need to ensure accountability and manage for performance, by assuring compliance with approved operating standards and evaluating the success and/or failure of the organization's efforts. The Office of Internal Audit and the Evaluation Office will be co-located to enable them to work more closely together to strengthen the assessment of institutional and country programme effectiveness. They will invest in joint and complementary tools and mechanisms, including further developing effectiveness indicators, to ensure and inform institutional performance. Organizing this way will preserve the distinctive contributions of each while improving coherence, information sharing and quality of learning.

23. The aim is to make the evaluation function a genuine learning and accountability

tool, relevant to the mandates of managers at all levels of the organization. It is recognized that much of the worth of the evaluation function is the measure of results achievement and the understanding why and why not they are achieved. The challenge is to also use prospectively evaluation in constructive partnership with other stakeholders to examine the extent to which UNICEF, the United Nations system and global alliances yield and foster tangible impacts for the improvement of the lives of children in the world.
