EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, UNICEF and its partners have set ambitious objectives for children. Evidence was paramount to achieving those results. Evidence to understand the state of the world’s children, what has been holding the most marginalized children back, and most importantly, evidence to learn and iterate on what can be done to improve their condition.

In a world with growing demands from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), protracted crises, increased human mobility, greater digital connectivity, and the rise of populism, grounding our work and corporate plans on real facts and knowledge has never been so critical. So, in 2017, UNICEF’s Data, Research and Policy (DRP) division sought to harness the power of evidence to drive change for children.

EVIDENCE ON WHAT AND WHY

Nowhere was this more evident than in our support to the implementation of MICS household surveys in 16 countries; the curation of globally comparable databases for >100 indicators; the development of updated estimates for >60 indicators; the release of brand new data estimates; and over 20 reports and research on areas that remain poorly understood (e.g. migration, climate change, violence, adolescence, digital rights). We also ventured into new frontiers of data science work in collaboration with the private sector and innovative research in humanitarian settings.

EVIDENCE ON HOW

We strived to get this evidence into the hands of change-makers through knowledge exchange (5,000 Yammer users a month); long-term agreements on research facilitation; learning platforms (31,000 Agora users); over 75 peer-reviewed research products; and guidance on south-south cooperation and climate change. We provided government support on a range of topics, from survey design and data processing (>300 counterparts) to measurement of child disability (>250 counterparts).

BECOMING MORE EVIDENCE-DRIVEN

To strengthen organizational accountability, we led the development of UNICEF’s new Strategic Plan 2018-2021 and Office Management Plans for the division and the Office of Research-Innocenti, with a new vision for the policy function, an expanded research agenda and knowledge sharing and convening capacity, and a new organization-wide Learning Strategy.

CHALLENGES

The 2017 Global Staff Survey for DRP NY shows that satisfaction with our ways of working ranks below the organization’s average and performance management is poor. We engaged in a consultative process to respond to the survey, focusing on concrete areas for improvement, placing greater scrutiny on realistic planning, and creating a divisional publication committee to provide greater oversight and focus to our products and deliverables. Striving for a healthy workplace in our quest to harness evidence for change is our goal for the next four years. And we welcome the challenge.
MAIN RESULTS ACHIEVED

Without a clear identification of the most marginalized children, UNICEF’s programs operate in the dark and their impact is undermined. In 2017, we have contributed to greater understanding of the status of the world’s children thanks to the latest round of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) in 16 countries and the creation and curation of global databases, which serve as a cornerstone for UNICEF’s program, policy and advocacy efforts. We have also made available new data estimates in various areas (e.g. children in alternative care, malnutrition, out-of-school children in conflict zones, new SDG WASH indicator) contributing to globally comparable data on children. Finally, thanks to Innocenti’s latest Report Card, 41 rich countries now have a point of departure for reviewing the SDG framework, adapting indicators to better reflect problems, challenges, and contexts, while staying true to the ambitions of the global agenda 2030. We have also produced first global estimates of food insecurity among households with children under 15, providing a baseline and method for measuring SDG 2.1.

We continued expanding, through partnerships, knowledge of the factors that hold children back and why, especially in areas that remain poorly understood and where the return to investing in evidence will be greatest:

- Our latest research shows that, migration is a youth phenomenon and children on the move face greater risks of violence and exploitation than adults. Abuses intensify depending on the route taken and the ethnicity of those children. In addition to better understanding of legal frameworks and safeguards for migrant children, our work also suggests that racism and xenophobia are on the rise in Europe and can impact on children’s migration status.
- Demographic shifts show that 2 billion babies will be born in Africa by 2050. The continent’s population will double in size by mid-century, and its under-18 population will increase to almost a billion. Our report urges national action plans to adapt to these demographic shifts, including bringing in more frontline health and education workers.
- Progress towards clean air has multiple benefits for children who are uniquely and irreversibly affected by climate change and pollution issues. Climate change is one of many forces contributing to an unfolding water crisis and we have identified that almost 600 million children will live in areas of extremely high water stress by 2030. At the same, almost 17 million babies under the age of one currently breathe toxic air, which can permanently damage their developing brains.
- How is raising adolescents understood and practiced? We have focused our research on filling knowledge gaps on the neglected area of parenting for adolescents. Evaluations show positive results from this work, including reduced violence and abusive parenting, but further testing is needed to make the program implementable.
- What is unique about the adolescent years? We have uncovered a link between early life circumstances and later outcomes, the importance of timing, and how adolescence may present a second window of opportunity for catch-up growth. We have mobilized leading thinkers (with > 65 peer reviewed publications) to work towards reframing a common agenda for adolescents. We have also established a hybrid researcher/practitioner network to better understand how severe shocks and famines affect adolescents.
Greater evidence of the impact of government cash transfers has informed design and scale of government programmes, expanded into cash plus (with additional interventions) in 10 countries in Africa thanks to a number of highly-disseminated studies, large-scale workshops (150 participants), over 15 peer-reviewed journal articles in 2017, 7 policy briefs, and 5 global webinars under the umbrella of the Transfer Project at Innocenti.

As digital and technological advances become ubiquitous, understanding their risks and opportunities for children’s everyday lives is critical. Our pioneering Global Kids Online multi-country research has grown from 4 to 15 countries since 2015 and became the cornerstone for our flagship publication, the State of the World’s Children. Last year, we developed an impact assessment toolkit, a highly cited study on internet governance, reviewed evidence on the potentially addictive nature of digital technology and produced an internal policy on digital rights.

We used the most current data to shed light on four specific forms of violence against children generating the highest-performing UNICEF retweeting efforts (>147,000 times) and driving traffic to the #ENDviolence campaign site with more than 100,000 visits within the first few days of the report launch.

Our evidence has also contributed to greater understanding on what works to address some of the challenges faced by children, expanding the reach of evidence and knowledge across the organization through:

- Research facilitation by enabling guidance and training on research management and methods, launching long-term agreements for research and ethics review, supporting the Evaluation Office, and developing a new web metrics to monitor impact of research.
- New knowledge exchange tools and south-south cooperation, including support to revamp our intranet governance system and 10 lessons learned on real time monitoring projects in Eastern and Southern Africa to inform scaling, while serving as model on how to document lessons learned from field projects. We also created a knowledge management system to support emerging areas of work and increased the monthly number of staff using Yammer from 3,000 to 5,000 across 10 online communities. A south-south guidance was created, including ground work on examples of horizontal cooperation and a basic package of services.
- Our learning platform, Agora, has now over 31k active users (up 18%) and an average of 1,742 sessions every day (up 27% from 2016). In 2017, we launched 17 new courses, 12 course translations, 8 new learning channels and 155 MOOCs. We also successfully rolled out new learning programs in public finance for children and health systems strengthening and continued to support the global rollout of results-based management training. This work has not gone unnoticed. We’re working with UN Women and the UN Secretariat to expand Agora for their learning needs.
- Setting the foundation for guidance on urbanization through a Plan of Action for UNICEF’s urban strategy, an urban planning handbook, a practice group and the rebuilding of the Child Friendly Cities website.
- New data measurement tools ranging from a new MICS post-emergency module to a new method to estimate low birthweight, and more reliable mortality estimates for children aged 5-14. We also continued testing approaches to measure adolescent participation, inclusive education, early childhood development, and nutrition/unhealthy eating.
Data interagency mechanisms for standard-settings in support to the 2030 countdown and greater harmonization on ECD measurement; collection of data on people with disabilities in humanitarian settings; and data sources on skilled attendants at birth. We also joined different consortia to develop a common approach for data storage through data platforms and standardized databases (e.g. Statistical Information Systems Collaboration Community and Humanitarian Data Exchange).

Enhancements to data websites to allow for greater flexibility to fit global campaigns, data viz dashboards, and country profiles (>1m visits to data.unicef.org and 150k to the MICS website), followed by targeted outreach through newsletters, social media and mailing lists.

The release of a Data for Children Strategic Framework aimed at helping make the most practical use of data to drive results, followed by the establishment of a data task force to improve coordination and a new internal website for knowledge sharing (>1,900 users).

An evaluation of UNICEF’s foresight capacity started in DRP showed positive results for broadening “strategic mindset, action and engagement of country and regional offices.” In the new strategic cycle and with the view to systematize its use, this function will be anchored in another division (Fields Results Group). To facilitate the transition, we produced a guidance toolkit on foresight and a draft interactive foresight repository platform.

Reaping the benefits of new technologies and partnerships to provide more data and new insights at lower costs and creating faster feedback loops to complex or emerging issues by:

- Leveraging big data from the private sector to create public value for children through Data Collaboratives. Building on a tested methodology that demonstrates the value proposition for corporate data-sharing for social good, we established corporate partnerships with Microsoft, Bloomberg, Telefonica, and Digital Globe, and academia (Harvard, ISI Foundation, GovLab, Universidad del Desarrollo) at no cost to UNICEF.
- Demonstrating the feasibility of rigorous impact research in humanitarian settings. Through a quasi-experimental impact evaluation, we showed the effects of cash transfers in contributing to greater school attendance of displaced Syrian children, which has been used by UNICEF Lebanon to advocate for expansion of the program to new areas of the country.

We also continued striving to get this evidence and knowledge into the hands of our country offices and government counterparts by:

- Enhancing government data capacity on survey design, data processing, data interpretation (>300 counterparts in 72 countries) and training of >250 counterparts on measurement of child disability. We have also contributed to strengthen national data systems by including questions on water quality testing to MICS for 10 countries, reviewing survey tools and admin data on violence and birth registration/marriages, and providing direct support on measurement and estimation work for SDG indicators.
- Greater understanding of child poverty in 40 countries through MODA, an analytical tool that quantifies multiple child deprivations. Several countries have included MODA in their national monitoring development plans for better targeting and the first ever estimates of child poverty for the Arab region were produced drawing on MODA.
- The development of Climate Landscape Analysis reports, which helped 15 country offices navigate their environmental institutions and processes as they begin to embed climate components into their programming.
● **Expansion of humanitarian-development research.** Innocenti research expertise on Rohingya provided timely cultural- and context-sensitive guidance for early L3 humanitarian interventions in Bangladesh. Similarly, support to the No Lost Generation programme through rigorous impact evaluation is informing evidence-based advocacy for increased school supply.

● **Foresight support** to 3 country offices, including through the creation of a game to identify the views of adolescents regarding their future in Tajikistan and the framing of strategic conversations at the NatCom CEOs 2017 annual meeting.

● **Greater understanding of data needs in 6 countries,** which are conducting data diagnostics to identify the most impactful data-related investments.

● **A proof of concept was completed,** in collaboration with the University of Tulane and the World Bank, for a new child-centric fiscal incidence analysis in Uganda (completed) and Guatemala (underway), with 5 other countries interested.

In 2017, we strengthened initiatives to make UNICEF more evidence-driven, through the development of a new Strategic Plan 2018-2021 in the SDG era. The new plan is a product of many consultations. It introduces new shifts in focus (e.g. the second decade of life) and includes a mature results framework, theories of change, and a common UN chapter and annex that were successfully integrated into the corporate plans of four other UN agencies. In support of these corporate functions, we have also produced a range of products that evolve evidence into corporate strategies and accountabilities (e.g. Executive Director Annual Report, PDb codes, Regular Resources planning level for Country Offices for 2018, review paper on the Global and Regional Programme). At the same time, divisional/Office four-year Office Management Plans put in place a series of building blocks aimed at instilling a stronger evidence culture throughout the organization based on the foundational efforts laid out by Innocenti in previous years. Finally, building on the latest evidence of what works for gender equality in the workplace, we catalyzed a corporate push to kick start the global assessment of and pursue the certification standard for gender equality (EDGE) in UNICEF.

**CURRENT OR PERSISTENT SHORTFALLS**

While staff’s perception of the division’s efficiency has improved 17% points since 2014, the latest Global Staff Survey shows that our current working processes rank below the organization’s average. Poor management performance is a recurrent theme, but other reasons exist. Since 2016, operational functions have been decentralized to the division with no additional resources, adding more work to an already stunningly low ratio between professional and general service staff. In 2017, fewer than 10 general service staff in both NY and Florence processed over 550 travel requests and more than 130 contracts. In response, we began a consultative process that established coaching sessions for all managers, recruitment and innovative resource pooling of administrative staff, and mandatory training on common processes. A task force has been established to oversee implementation and ensure accountability.

The ambition of our plans is not always accompanied by matching human and financial resources. Research partnerships between Innocenti and Country and Regional Offices grew in 2017 on key areas (e.g. migration, social protection, education, adolescents), with active research networks spanning over 200 partners, including GLORI. This situation worsens with a plethora of last-minute
and ad hoc requests from many parts of the house, which are not budgeted in the time, capacity or resources. Some units have adapted to this recurrent situation and started allocating budget and time from the outset for these unforeseen circumstances, establishing clear guidelines and processes for pushing back if capacity cannot be absorbed, and keeping responses short and focused to avoid unnecessary time spent on analyses. But this is not consistent across teams. Closer scrutiny in the 2018 annual work plans should reinforce more realistic planning.

**The sustainability of some of our programs needs re-thinking.** With more SDG indicators to monitor, more surveys to implement, and more sophisticated methodologies to develop, the need for long-term sustainable funding models for MICS has reached a critical point.

**Striking a balance between support to global and regional/country demand.** Improving connections with the field has been a cornerstone of our work in 2017. This has not been easy, however, given the resources available as well as the increased demand for support, especially on research, climate and environment work and setting and monitoring SDG WASH targets and other baselines, which required intensive work and coordinated response across DRP and other divisions. To improve this function and manage expectations, we have learned the importance of finding champions to scale, becoming involved early on in initiatives together with the field, and showing impact of joint work.

**The lack of a unified data management system** means substantial time is spent on compiling, processing, and organizing data for different purposes taking time away from key staff on upstream analytical products and initiatives. The solution should come in the form a new database platform, which is in the pipeline.

**The rebuilding of the policy function is a work in progress.** This was the focus of our office management plan and entailed the removal of ancillary roles and greater focus on building synergies across policy teams. While this disrupted original work plans, it has led to efforts and space to articulate working mechanisms, common topics, which improved coordination and outputs, as well as a more cohesive overall vision for our policy work.

**A new cohesive approach to publications.** Publications are one of the key instruments through which we seek to disseminate, and elevate the role of evidence in advancing the welfare of children. Yet publications were spread thin across many areas without a clear indication of impact. So we established a divisional Publication Committee to provide greater oversight and guidance to this function and ultimate raise the effectiveness and efficiency of our products. In 2017, much of the efforts were directed into creating the infrastructure to implement this vision (e.g. taskforce, terms of reference, form, workflows, etc).

**Unleashing the power of data for children is a team sport that requires a diverse and energetic coalition of advocates.** We are seeking to expand that coalition, but the challenge is not about the potential of data. The most difficult – and potentially transformative – work to come is embedding a culture of data demand, supply and use throughout the work of DRP and our partners within and outside UNICEF. The demands and opportunities of the SDGs compound the urgency of getting that balance right.
EVALUATIONS AND RESEARCH

Title: A child is a child: protecting children on the move from violence, abuse and exploitation
Year: 2017
Themes: Migration

Title: Harrowing Journeys: children and youth on the move across the Mediterranean Sea, at risk of trafficking and exploitation
Year: 2017
Themes: Migration

Title: Thirsting for a Future: the impact of climate change on water and sanitation for children
Year: 2017
Themes: Climate Change

Title: Generation 2030: Africa 2.0
Year: 2017
Themes: Demographics

Title: Public Expenditure Review: Air pollution in Mongolia
Year: 2017
Themes: Climate Change

Title: Danger in the air: impact of air pollution on children’s cognitive development
Year: 2017
Themes: Climate Change

Title: South-south cooperation for children
Year: 2017
Themes: South-south cooperation

Title: Horizons, February; June; September 2017
Year: 2017
Themes: Foresight

Title: UNICEF’s foresight capacity: Review Report
Year: 2017
Themes: Foresight

Title: Scoping Paper: Policy Labs
Year: 2017
Themes: Policy

Title: Capstone paper: Implications of rapid demographic changes on investments in children
Year: 2017
Themes: Demographics

Title: Guidance on using foresight in UNICEF’s Country Programme Cycles
Year: 2017
Themes: Foresight

Title: Scoping Paper: Unconditional Child Grants
Year: 2017
Themes: Cash transfers

Title: Climate landscape analysis for children in 4 countries
Year: 2017
Sequence Number: 2017
Themes: UNICEF Climate Change

Title: 7 briefs on Conducting Research with Adolescents in Low- and Middle-Income countries
Year: 2017
Themes: Adolescents

Title: Compendium on The Adolescent Brain: A Second Window of Opportunity
Year: 2017
Themes: Adolescents

Title: Innocenti Adolescent Research Digest March; June; September, December 2017
Year: 2017
Themes: Adolescents

Title: Gender Socialization during Adolescence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Conceptualization, influences and outcomes
Year: 2017
Themes: Gender; adolescents

Title: Evidence Gap Map on Adolescent Well-being in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Protection, participation, and financial and material well-being
Year: 2017
Themes: Adolescents

Title: Evidence from cash transfer programmes in Africa, including completed evaluations, as well as new data collections and initiatives including 9 international peer reviewed journal articles and 7 working papers
Year: 2017
Themes: Cash transfers

Title: Report Card 14 “Building the Future: Children and the Sustainable Development Goals in Rich Countries”
Year: 2017
Themes: Gender; adolescents; SDGs

Title: Prevalence and Correlates of Food Insecurity among Children across the Globe Global numbers of food insecurity for children based on Gallup World Poll
Year: 2017
Themes: Food security

Title: Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene: 2017 update and SDG baselines
Year: 2017
2017 ANNUAL REPORT

**Themes:** Water, sanitation, hygiene, SDGs

**Title:** Multidimensional child poverty measures in developed and developing countries, resulting in 5 international peer reviewed journal articles and 2 working papers.
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** Multidimensional child poverty

**Title:** A Snapshot of Civil Registration in Sub-Saharan Africa
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** Civil registration; birth registration; marriage; sub-Saharan Africa

**Title:** A Familiar Face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** violence against children; Sustainable Development Goals

**Title:** Estimating the number of children in formal alternative care: Challenges and results
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** alternative care; residential care; foster care

**Title:** Achieving a Future without Child Marriage: Focus on West and Central Africa
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** child marriage; projections; Sustainable Development Goals

**Title:** Accelerating Efforts to Eliminate Child Marriage in Africa
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** child marriage; projections; Sustainable Development Goals

**Title:** How to Make ‘Cash Plus’ Work: Linking Cash Transfers to Services and Sectors
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** Social protection

**Title:** Myth-busting? Confronting Six Common Perceptions about Unconditional Cash Transfers as a Poverty Reduction Strategy in Africa
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** Social Protection

**Title:** Innocenti Series on Conducting Research with Adolescents in low and middle income-countries (7 briefs)
**Year:** 2017
**Themes:** Adolescents