Oral report on harnessing knowledge to achieve results for children

Summary

This report is submitted pursuant to decision 2012/3, in which the Executive Board welcomed the strategy set out in Harnessing knowledge to achieve results for children (E/ICEF/2012/6). It encouraged UNICEF to report at its annual session of 2013 on the strategic priorities and organizational steps as well as key results set out in the framework, and on concrete steps taken to improve knowledge management at headquarters and in the field.

I. Background

1. The present report summarizes the progress made since the strategic framework for research and knowledge management was presented in February 2012; it highlights the steps UNICEF has undertaken to strengthen the evidence base for its work.

2. As such, the paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive review of research and knowledge management underway across the organization; rather, it reflects the intensified focus on harnessing knowledge to achieve better results for children and gives examples of actions taken to better integrate research and evidence into the work of UNICEF. These include steps taken over the last 15 months to address institutional gaps in the way knowledge is gathered,
managed and used by the organization. Finally, opportunities where progress can be further accelerated are identified for action in the coming period.

II. Progress on the three main strategies

3. The previous report (E/ICEF/2012/6) outlined three strategies to support the goal of harnessing available knowledge to accelerate and improve results for children, giving a particular focus on achieving the Millennium Development Goals with equity: (a) building the evidence base around the most effective interventions affecting the lives of children; (b) supporting country offices and their partners as both starting point and most important end-users of knowledge gathering and use; and (c) forging more effective linkages between technical areas and knowledge functions of the organization.

4. The three strategic priorities remain highly relevant. Progress has taken place on each.

A. Building the evidence base for results for children

5. Progress in analytical approaches and data collection. The last period has been marked by developments in strengthening the way evidence informs and is shaping the organization’s drive for equity and addressing the social and structural determinants of child wellbeing. Three key examples are:

6. The Monitoring Results for Equity System (MoRES) of UNICEF aims at monitoring progress in removing key barriers and bottlenecks at the intermediate outcome level, complemented by timely adjustments to strategies and polices. While adapted to local settings, the mainstreaming of MoRES further reinforces the use of evidence by UNICEF country offices. In 2012, MoRES was applied to more than 30 countries. A recent multi-country review of UNICEF-led or supported real-time monitoring initiatives highlighted the great potential of real-time monitoring to prompt and facilitate problem solving and decision making for improved service delivery and policy responses, often using information and communication technologies.

7. It is increasingly recognized that deprivations affecting children are often multi-faceted and that these are more likely to occur – and have more adverse effects – among the poorest children. Building on the equity approach of MoRES, the Office of Research has developed a tool – Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA) – that allows national policy makers to make better use of evidence on who the most deprived children are, where they are located within their countries, and ask questions about the underlying drivers of poor outcomes for children. MODA takes advantage of data already available from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) or the national surveys to examine poverty and deprivations among children from a multi-dimensional perspective and across different stages of the life cycle. MODA provides a unique yet easily accessible advocacy tool for policy makers; it will be used to strengthen the equity dimensions of situation analysis and underline the need for multi-sectoral action. MODA is currently being rolled out, with results to be made available for all countries with recent MICS or DHS data, by the end of 2013.

8. Continued improvement and expansion of data collection tools have occurred as part of the MICS programme. New modules and indicators have been added in several areas, including child labour, maternal health and water quality. In terms of methodological work, UNICEF
contributed to the development of innovative methods to measure population coverage for interventions in maternal, newborn and child health. The development of a new questionnaire for the collection of data on child disability is under way. Several data analysis projects have been undertaken, and key data-driven publications have been released or are currently under finalization. UNICEF is also working on further strengthening the dissemination of data, through its revamped ChildInfo website, where UNICEF global databases are made available, together with the original MICS datasets.

9. **Focused research initiatives.** Each of the main programme areas where UNICEF is engaged has moved forward in the use of research in innovative ways. Such initiatives are often part of wider partnerships that bring policy and research together at the global and country levels. In the most recent period, this includes research that underpins the following efforts:

   (a) Scaling up highly effective community-level interventions to increase access to essential drugs and services for the neonate;

   (b) Models of programme delivery of high-impact interventions in nutrition and early childhood development that reach out to parents and families;

   (c) New frameworks to explore the role of social norms in bringing change in societal behaviours around sanitation or addressing violence against children;

   (d) Modelling the impact of applying an investment approach to HIV among adolescents;

   (e) Building capacities of systems to respond to child protection; and

   (f) Innovations in social protection, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, on the impact of cash transfers on child wellbeing, and in ensuring social protection is more HIV-sensitive.

   (g) UNICEF work on new information technologies has been underpinned with research, most recently, with a focus on innovations to make services accountable to the community and foster the participation of young people.

10. **Research and advocacy on children in high-income countries.** The Office of Research continues to bring research to support National Committees directly through its flagship Innocenti Report Card series, where research and advocacy are linked in unique ways. In 2012-2013, two report cards focused on child poverty and child well-being, explored new frameworks in measuring progress for children across rich countries, in the context of the current financial crisis.

11. **Future directions and challenges.** Many areas call for increased research and data-collection efforts by UNICEF in the future. Without being exhaustive, the following examples illustrate some of these future directions:

   (a) Research will continue to seek to deepen knowledge on achieving equitable outcomes for children. Work in MoRES is underlining the need to tackle the barriers to equitable access to services and also to carry out actions across sectors to address structural and social drivers of inequities, including gender, and the cumulative disadvantages that start early in life.
Additional efforts are needed to analyse capacities to scale up known interventions and innovations with a high impact on the well-being of children, particularly the most disadvantaged and excluded children, and to document and disseminate such experiences. Systematic research on barriers and bottlenecks for positive behaviour change related to children, adolescents and their families is a priority in this context.

(b) While there is increasing policy awareness on what can be done to improve material well-being and child survival, emphasis across all the interrelated dimensions of child well-being is still lacking. A shift in research is called for to study the cross-sector and multi-sector impact of programmes in order to gain a better understanding of the added value of such interventions in different contexts. Understanding such linkages in addressing gender inequalities at country level will be a focus during 2013-2014, as will rigorous approaches to make the investment case for improving child well-being, and document the ‘costs of inaction’.

(c) The recent emphasis of UNICEF on a systems approach to the protection of children has brought into sharp focus the current lack of evidence on the ‘drivers’ of violence against children. The Global Learning Initiative on Violence against Children – a recent initiative by UNICEF and a broad range of partners – sets an example of filling a critical evidence gap through global partnerships. Drawing consciously on the experience of previous initiatives, the Global Learning Initiative will aim to build and support an independent network of researchers, especially based in the South, to bring together and synthesise findings from recent studies and interventions, while maintaining a strong knowledge sharing and advocacy role as it unfolds.

(d) New emerging avenues of programme research include approaches to school-based interventions (shifting gender norms and piloting interventions that could expand coverage of new vaccines, including those against the human papillomavirus for adolescent girls, using such an opportunity for health, gender equality, HIV and child protection goals), state of the art interventions on adolescence as a key relatively unexplored field of programme intervention, and in support of the UNICEF education for peacebuilding programme.

(e) In humanitarian contexts, UNICEF will strengthen its ability to act as a centre of excellence for humanitarian knowledge analysis, and leverage this capacity to empower partners with state-of-the-art standards and tools to facilitate effective humanitarian action.

(f) Digital access and literacy is growing apace, with new opportunities for solving practical, often longstanding bottlenecks in service quality and strengthening accountability of service providers. A scoping exercise carried out by the Office of Research confirms that many of the informative, interactive and participatory features of the digital environment remain substantially underused, even by well-resourced children. Recent evidence reveals many ways in which the internet and mobile technologies amplify or extend pre-existing risks of harm to children’s safety, well-being and development. Whereas past studies tended to examine children’s activities within a national context, technological networks and services are transnational, as are regulatory structures, and highlight the need for cross-national comparative research.
(g) In almost all countries, the availability of data on children has grown, mainly thanks to household surveys, such as MICS and DHS, and other more targeted survey instruments. In many settings, however, the data generated by these surveys is still not sufficiently used in setting policies. As countries move into the post-2015 period, a monitoring system for the next round of development goals will need to be designed, including the development of new indicators and data collection tools, with accompanying attention to the analysis of data and technical assistance in the design and implementation of surveys. This will be an increasing area of focus for UNICEF.

B. Putting countries at the centre of knowledge gathering and use

12. The strength of UNICEF as an organization remains its local presence, its ability to bring to bear global knowledge tailored to different contexts, and to look across sectors at the whole child. National capacities to generate and make use of research in their policies for children are growing rapidly and closely related to the use of evaluation and the strengthening of national statistical offices.

13. **Progress in efforts to strengthen gathering and use of evidence at country level.** The country programme remains at the centre of UNICEF partnerships and action. New activities have contributed to building an institution-wide system to support use of analysis and research at country level.

   (a) A recent assessment of the methodology for in-country situation analyses on children and women confirmed the continued strengths of such a tool for both UNICEF and partners. In order to make these analyses as up-to-date and ‘live’ assessments of underlying drivers of child outcomes, new tools and resources are being developed, including through the more systematic use of research and evidence, and do this through partnerships across different levels of the organization.

   (b) An assessment of existing quality assurance mechanisms in support of research at country and regional levels is currently underway. Preliminary feedback confirms that at present the quality assurance of programmes is primarily taken by the evaluation function within UNICEF. The same priority now needs to be extended to research. Integral to quality assurance is adherence to ethical standards in all research with children. After an extensive consultative process with academics engaged in research on children and the policy community (including UNICEF staff), a set of ethical guidelines is close to finalization. A ‘charter’ capturing the principles of ethical research with children – both protective and empowering, challenging the research community to fully engage in addressing practical dilemmas that arise in research practice – accompanies the guidelines and is being made available to country offices and partners through a web-based portal.

   (c) A ‘snapshot’ of research underway in UNICEF was organised to capture the range of research across the organization and to illustrate the critical ways research can affect policies and programmes for children. The Office of Research invited all parts of the organization to share research that UNICEF had either carried out itself or commissioned through partners and completed in 2012, which they believed (a) to have high potential for impact on policy and programmes; (b) was innovative; or (c) had shifted national policy debate for children in a significant way. The initiative was met by a response across the organization that was far beyond
expectations: 91 contributions were submitted for consideration as the ‘Best of UNICEF Research 2012’. The 10 most promising research projects that fully met the criteria were forwarded to an independent panel for their review and assessment.

(d) A number of important lessons emerged from this exercise. First, it confirmed the growing role of research in UNICEF work, with the range of themes covering all main programme fields, from all regions, including where UNICEF is present through National Committees. Second, it highlighted the range of methodological approaches adopted, from impact evaluations based on randomized control trials to in-depth assessments of systems and qualitative studies. Most have been carried out in partnership with national or international research centres. Thirdly, it drew attention to quality issues. A significant number of individual research products were of high quality; others, while clearly important in individual settings, had only limited potential for broader application; a few did not meet key standards in methodological practice. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there was relatively little evidence of linkage of research efforts across countries. A ‘critical mass’ of research drawing together lessons across different settings is still to be harnessed.

(e) Innovative communication methods are being deployed to promote knowledge dissemination. In order to create more opportunities for countries to share and access knowledge across sectors and regions, a ‘one-stop shop’ for research will be developed, as support to the field and partners but also to monitor how responsive research is to UNICEF needs.

(f) During 2012, the new eTV ‘Research Watch’ debate series was launched to share the latest thinking in development policy and research findings in a format that is easily accessible to field staff. The first round of six debates explored core programme concerns of health and equity, early childhood development and nutrition, as well as wider themes of climate change and children and the contours of the emerging post-2015 development agenda. In 2012, Research Watch added more than 30,000 hits to the website of the Office of Research, which has begun to reach out extensively in social media, expanding its base on Facebook and Twitter.

14. **Future directions.** The nurturing of a ‘critical mass’ of research around selected topics clearly offers one of the most important and tangible areas of high returns on UNICEF research. The regional management teams are increasingly a central forum to carry forward and develop such a coordinated approach; these are best placed to define the specific role of evidence in different kinds of settings, ranging from identifying knowledge opportunities for programme intervention to policy dialogue.

15. A key role of the rest of the organization, including the Office of Research, will be on standard setting and methodological support. In the coming period, the focus will be on establishing quality-assurance mechanisms across UNICEF (including peer review of major research), lay the foundations of an organization-wide ‘practice’ of research and, over time, raise quality standards of research, improve collaboration and facilitate the sharing of knowledge resources. This will be supported by concerted efforts to deepen partnerships, especially in the South, with national, regional and global research organizations. The guidelines on ethical research will be complemented by UNICEF-specific guidance on ethical review and rollout of
the ethics resource website. The ‘showcasing’ exercise will continue as a means to recognize outstanding work by country, regional or headquarters teams and to support scaling-up and cross-organizational learning.

C. **Strengthening linkages across technical areas of UNICEF work at country regional and headquarters levels**

16. The third strategy of the integrated framework seeks to strengthen consistency, minimize overlap and duplication and generate synergies in research processes across the organization.

17. **Progress in mainstreaming evidence and research into the Strategic Plan.** An important development that potentially will have the most impact on the effectiveness of UNICEF as a knowledge organization is the articulation of evidence, research and knowledge management in the Strategic Plan for 2014-2017. The new Strategic Plan identifies evidence generation and evidence-based policy dialogue and advocacy as among its key implementation strategies. The Strategic Plan highlights the importance of research to underpin each of its outcome areas and envisages a process of structured learning, sharing and applying knowledge with partners across programme fields.

18. At the heart of these ambitions are benchmarks for country programmes to support (a) the generation, dissemination and use of high-quality evidence for programme, policy and advocacy; (b) strengthened mechanisms of quality assurance; (c) establishment of robust partnerships; and (d) adequate resources and capacities to meet these demands. Achievement of these critical benchmarks will bring about a strategic shift in the way UNICEF gathers and uses evidence and positions itself around knowledge for children in different country contexts. A set of indicators at the level of organizational targets will be set out in 2013 that will allow monitoring of the implementation of the evidence and research components of the Strategic Plan.

19. **New coordination mechanisms and activities to support collaboration.** These new mechanisms aim to foster sharing of responsibilities for the generation and dissemination of evidence. A Standing Committee on Policy and Research was created in 2012 to bring together the knowledge and evidence group at headquarters and to provide a platform for strengthening UNICEF as an evidence-based organization, by sharing priorities and achieving greater synergies through cross-divisional strategies. The Standing Committee has met four times since 2012. Links between evaluation, statistics and research are being strengthened, including jointly articulating a fresh taxonomy of research, studies and surveys in use across UNICEF. Furthermore, an interdivisional task force on operational research is engaged in mapping ongoing research activities and in identifying critical research gaps.

20. **Partnerships and accountabilities for knowledge management.** The previous report laid out the vision for a strong UNICEF research and knowledge management model to drive the evidence agenda forward, especially in support of the equity drive. During 2012, the Knowledge Management Working Group took stock of the quality, development and dissemination mechanisms for knowledge products, and rollout of new tools to support knowledge management across programme sections. The Office of Research commissioned a consultancy firm to study research and knowledge management models used in the most effective global knowledge organizations and develop proposals to help define the particular model UNICEF (and the Office of Research in particular) could pursue for best results. The report includes a
vision for how this strategy could be fully developed over time, subject to available resources, with a roadmap for the Office of Research to follow. The report underlined that UNICEF has invested less in its approach to knowledge management than similar organizations. UNICEF is currently determining which model of knowledge management is best suited to meet its organizational needs, and has made a commitment to implement this in support of strengthening the organization’s generation and use of its strong ‘tacit’ as well as ‘formal’ knowledge.

21. A strong knowledge management and research function depends on an effective information management system and use of latest information technologies. UNICEF has introduced a number of key underlying mainstream technologies, such as SharePoint, Yammer and I-Ask, to facilitate and enable the sharing of knowledge across the organization. A centralized document and information database will be developed to provide information on what UNICEF is doing and achieving in its programmes and advocacy.

22. **Future directions.** The Strategic Plan implementation strategy on evidence is now ready to be translated into action. Building on existing coordination mechanisms, critical research gaps will be identified and organization-wide priorities established. Indicators to measure progress against result areas are aimed to stimulate enquiry and help to shape a coherent research programme in support of programme design and implementation.

23. Success in strengthening UNICEF as an evidence-based organization will also depend on greater horizontal cooperation between different sectors internally, as well as at the national level and with academic and civil society partners.

D. **Next organizational steps**

24. Organizational steps identified in the strategy set out in the previous report in support of the strategic integrated framework included clarifying the functions of the Office of Research and ensuring adequate resources.

25. **The Office of Research was significantly strengthened in 2012.** With a renewed mandate, the Office of Research has focused on putting the groundwork in place for a new, integrated research and knowledge management function to be rolled out across the organization over the coming years. The Office of Research is now fully staffed against funded posts, across its three main areas of work: (a) strategic research; (b) building capacities to generate and use research; and (c) communications. The previous cycle of research was completed and a new core programme of work established.

26. The mandate of the Office of Research has been clarified, with the Office focusing its strategic research on a few critical areas, identified in close partnership with the research community, headquarters divisions and regional and country offices. Among its tasks, the Office of Research establishes and disseminates best practice guidance to uphold high standards of research practice, interpretation and use; and builds strong relations with relevant UNICEF programmes to anchor research as a contribution to existing programmes of work. It has worked to integrate diverse disciplinary and areas of expertise, including convening expert resources and forums to link headquarters divisions and regional and country offices around forward-looking agendas and challenges.
27. **Resources.** The increasing volume of research and studies carried out constitutes a substantial investment of UNICEF resources. UNICEF continues its clear commitment to research and knowledge management in the new Strategic Plan, and will continue to use knowledge to drive for results.