

TECHNICAL NOTE

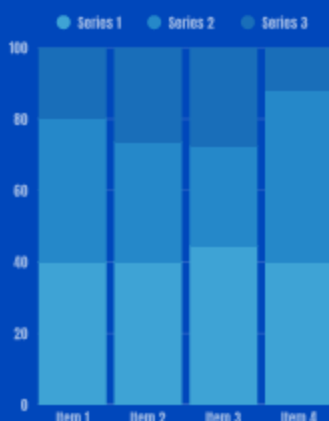
ON THE INCLUSION OF HARD-TO-REACH

POPULATIONS

AND

CHILDREN IN

EVALUATIONS



Developed by
Sofiya Yuvshanova
ECARO Evaluation Specialist



Technical Note on the inclusion of hard-to-reach populations and children in evaluations | Final Report, 2025

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Author: Sofiya Yuvshanova | ECARO Evaluation Specialist

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Design: Gustavo Ernesto Martínez Cárdenas

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July 2025

Europe and Central Asia Regional Office
303, Baizakov Street
A15G7T0, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Phone: +7 727 2582643

ecaro@unicef.org

<https://unicef.org/eca/evaluation-unicef-ecaro>

facebook.com/unicefecar

linkedin.com/company/unicefecaro

x.com/unicef_eca

Acknowledgements

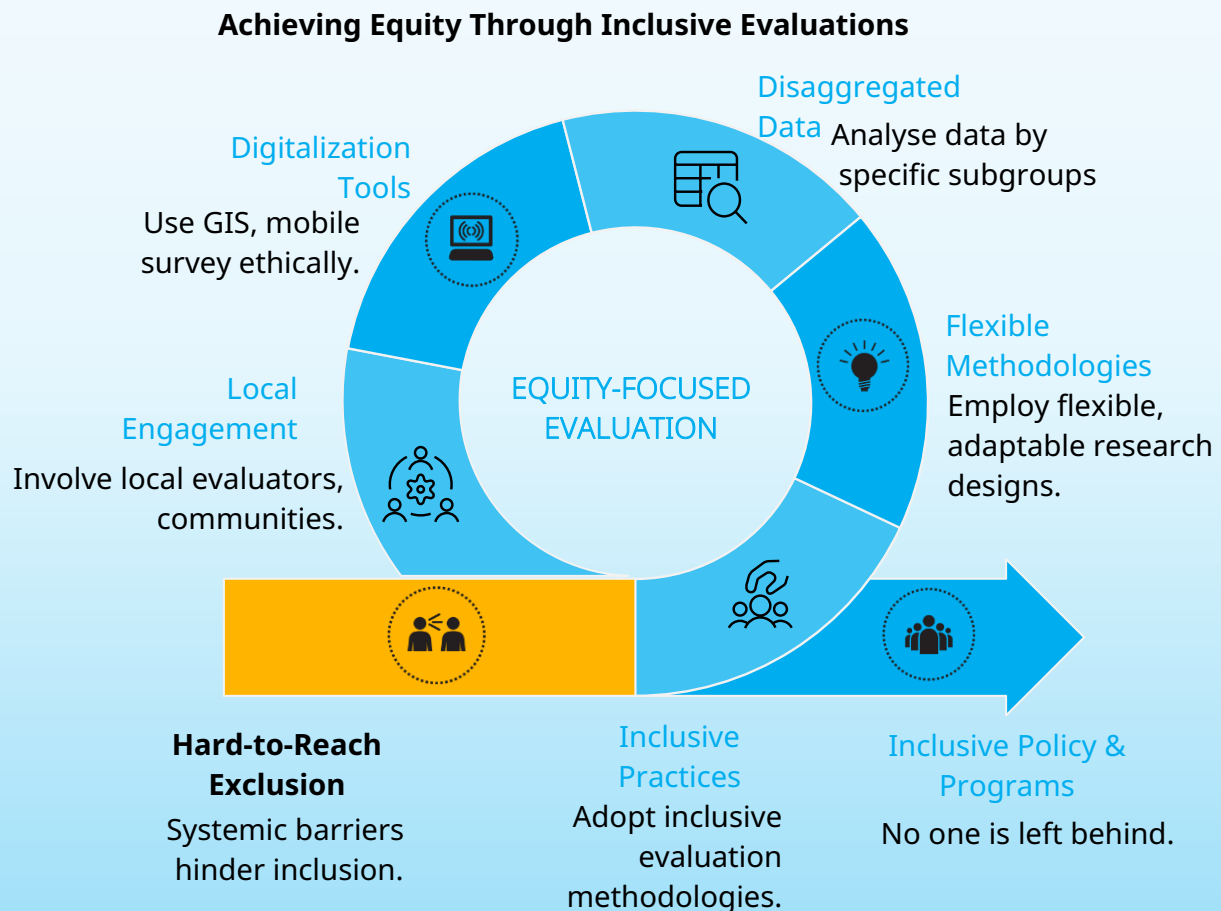
With thanks to Saltanat Rasulova, former UNICEF ECARO Evaluation Specialist and currently Evaluation Advisor at ECARO UNDP, for the initial contribution to this Technical Note, and also Sarah Capper, Evaluation Specialist, UNICEF Yemen Country Office.

I am very grateful to the following UNICEF colleagues for their peer review: Ana Prodanovic, CRM-E Specialist from the Serbia Country Office; Tetyana Nikitina, Monitoring Specialist, East, Port Sudan; and Mubinjon Rustamov, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist in Tajikistan.

I would like to express my gratitude to Karen Carter, Senior Advisor, Ethics in Evidence Generation UNICEF Innocenti, Global Office of Research and Foresight for her contribution to this Technical Note as co-author.

Thank you to Mirella Hernani, UNICEF ECARO Regional Evaluation Advisor for her continuous inspiration and support.

Summary



Hard-to-reach populations face exclusion due to systemic, geographical, cultural and socioeconomic barriers. This Technical Note was developed to guide the inclusion of hard-to-reach families and children in policy and programme evaluations, so as to achieve equity and align with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Strategic Plan of the United

Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The document stresses the importance of human rights in UNICEF's approach to evaluation, outlining the key challenges including logistical constraints, ethical considerations, and resistance from institutions, while proposing equity-focused evaluation methodologies to address these barriers.

The Technical Note proposes an equity-based framework that is presented

across the four dimensions of an evaluation: intervention, process, design, and data. For each dimension, the Technical Note underscores the need for inclusive practices, flexible methodologies, and disaggregated data analysis to ensure that evaluations capture the realities of the hard-to-reach groups. Mixed-method approaches are recommended to provide a comprehensive understanding of these populations lived experiences and the impact of interventions.

The role of digitalization is explored as a potential solution to engage hard-to-reach populations effectively. Tools like geographic information system (GIS) mapping, mobile surveys, and

crowdsourcing offer innovative ways to collect data and require stringent ethical safeguards to protect privacy and address the digital divide.

Recommendations include engaging local evaluators, developing culturally sensitive informed consent processes, and building the capacity of communities to participate in evaluations. Additionally, dissemination strategies should ensure findings are accessible and actionable for diverse stakeholders.

The Technical Note concludes by advocating equity-focused evaluations as essential tools for generating evidence to inform policies and interventions that leave no one behind.

unicef  | for every child

for every child, **every right**
for every child, **equity in evaluation**
for every child, **inclusive practices**
for every child, **no one left behind**
for every child, **disaggregated data**
for every child, **ethical safeguards**
for every child, **community engagement**
for every child, **digital inclusion**
for every child, **equitable outcomes**

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
CML	Causal machine learning
ECARO	Europe and Central Asia Regional Office
GIS	Geographic information system
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
PAR	Participatory action research
RCT	Randomized controlled trial
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SROI	Social return on investment
ToC	Theory of change
ToR	Terms of reference
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1. Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the protection and well-being of all children, regardless of their circumstances. While it does not specifically mention ‘hard-to-reach’ children, it does highlight several key principles relevant to their rights. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reiterate the importance of following the principle of ‘leave no one behind’, defined as prioritizing the rights and needs of the most marginalized individuals and communities. It is a commitment to eradicating poverty, discrimination, and exclusion, while reducing inequalities and vulnerabilities that undermine a safe and equitable future for all (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2022).¹ The UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 also emphasizes the importance of leaving no one behind, declaring that: “Non-discrimination is a guiding principle of all UNICEF work. It underlies the pledge set out in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind, guiding the core focus of UNICEF on equity and inclusion. The organization

actively seeks out and supports children from the poorest, most marginalized and excluded groups, including children living in extreme poverty; children with disabilities; indigenous children; children belonging to racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups and migrant communities who experience discrimination; and children who are discriminated against for any other reason.” Non-discrimination and respect (including ensuring that we engage with the populations that we intend to represent in our findings) are also key principles of the UNICEF Procedure on Ethics in Evidence activities (to be updated to policy in 2025²).

While focus on leaving no one behind is always essential, it becomes particularly critical in humanitarian situations when conflict erupts, or disaster strikes. In recent years, COVID-19, conflicts and the climate emergency has shown the need for stronger efforts to reach families and children, with a special focus on those

¹ At the country level, ‘leave no one behind’ is one of the six guiding principles under the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and is operationalized through the United Nations Sustainable Development Group

(2022) Operationalizing Leaving No One Behind: Good practice note for UN Country Teams.

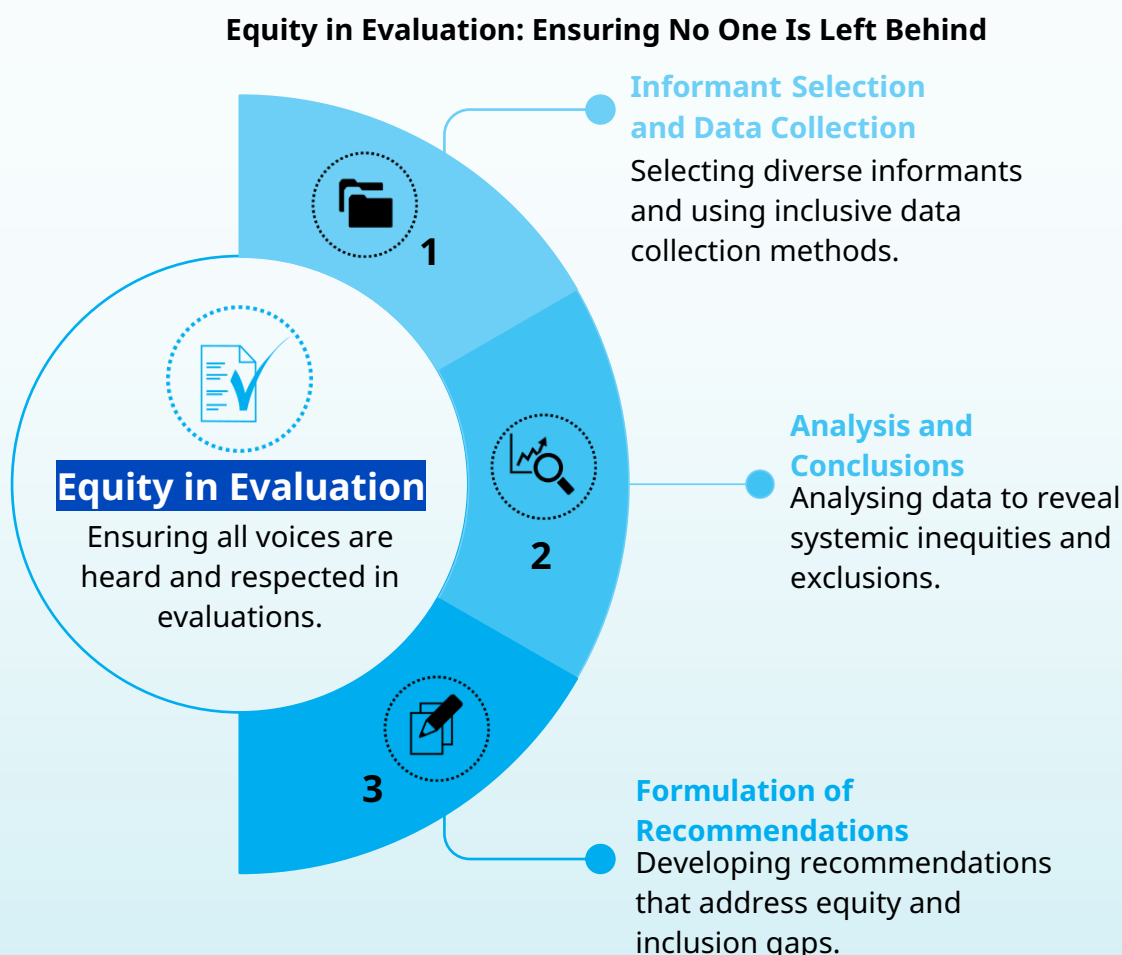
² See United Nations Children’s Fund (2021), ‘UNICEF Procedure Ethical Standards in Evidence Update’.

who are hard to reach. Affected populations – especially children – often need special efforts to ensure their dignity and rights are protected, and that they are not exposed to additional vulnerabilities and the risks of violence, exploitation, and abuse, both in programming and response and in the evaluation process itself. Understanding more about hard-to-reach families and children is essential, as without this understanding, assessing the real impact of natural and human-made disasters and conflicts on these populations is nearly impossible.

Importantly, failing to understand who these children are – and what works or does not work for them – can lead to unintended harm. Policies and programmes that appear successful overall may actually deepen disparities if they overlook excluded populations. Without data and analysis on what works or does not work for hard-to-reach groups, we risk developing interventions that benefit the majority while exacerbating gaps for the minority.

Midway through implementation of Agenda 2030, there is an urgent need for evaluative tools and guidance that explicitly include hard-to-reach populations. Doing so is essential to ensure equity-focused policymaking, and to make sure that evaluations truly reflect the realities of *all* children – not just those who are easiest to reach.

2. Rationale



As a source of rigorous evidence, evaluation at UNICEF ensures that the organization has timely, strategically focused and objective information on the performance of its policies, programmes and initiatives to produce better results for children and women, including the most vulnerable. Evaluation is intended to strengthen evidence-based decision-making and

advocacy, and to determine the relevance, impact, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the interventions and contributions of the organization (United Nations Children's Fund Evaluation Policy, 2023).

This Technical Note is intended to help evaluation practitioners plan evaluations that include hard-to-reach families and

children, through focussing on ethics and equity. UNICEF has a mandate to support these children, especially in humanitarian situations. This requires identifying and understanding hard-to-reach families and children to assess the impact of national policies, disasters and conflicts.

Evaluation has a substantial role to play in making sure that UNICEF is leaving no one behind and reaching those that are hard-to-reach. Unfortunately, systems that were built and standards we apply for evaluation practice do not always sufficiently value the voice and perspectives of populations left behind. If we continue to leave hard-to-reach populations behind, it will be difficult to overcome injustice. This reflects the wider goal of leaving no one behind, that "...requires the transformation of deeply rooted systems – economic, social and political, governance structures and business models at all levels, from local to global. Without such a comprehensive effort, significant disparities will remain across regions and countries." (UNSDG Operational Guide: Operationalizing Leaving No One Behind, 2022).

According to Jore Ali and Fraser (2020), the core challenge in the development sector is that while striving to reduce disparities between genders, income groups, and global regions under frameworks like the SDGs, there is a risk of perpetuating deeply entrenched systemic and structural inequities. As a result, development initiatives may unintentionally compound existing injustices, thereby undermining genuine

efforts toward inclusive and equitable progress. This is as true for evaluation as for any other area of work in the development sector.

Reaching hard-to-reach groups should be the role of evaluators, as evaluators can confront and change practices common in a specific context. As stated by Porter (2018): "Evaluators are after all a group, whose job it is to systematically and objectively verify the value of the work we undertake and help those in power, no matter how well-meaning, to see truths about why we are leaving people behind." Instead, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices often inadvertently reinforce inequality and exclusion by focusing on generating evidence primarily for upward accountability to donors and development partners, rather than fostering mutual accountability or facilitating learning at community level. Evaluation practitioners often overlook hard-to-reach populations due to logistical challenges, increased costs, and the additional time and effort required to apply rigorous ethical safeguards, despite the existence of many different methods and targeted approaches. Resulting recommendations are then based on incomplete evidence and may fail to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of excluded groups. Consequently, management actions in response to evaluation findings may become overly generalized or homogeneous, risking ineffectiveness or harm to the very populations most in need of support.

For example, in education-focused evaluations, data collection may prioritize national exam scores or enrolment rates, which align with donor reporting requirements, while overlooking the voices of marginalized groups such as children with disabilities or ethnic minorities. This exclusion skews understanding of programme effectiveness, while also failing to generate actionable insights for improving access and inclusion for those most at risk of being left behind. As Porter (2018) concludes, “understanding how our practice is exercised and encourages invisibility is a starting point for evaluators to understand where we contribute to injustice, perhaps unwittingly.”

Throughout the evaluation process, ensuring adequate representation of all groups, including vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups, is challenging, and may require additional safeguards and support. There are three key areas in evaluation where engagement with, and the impact on, these groups can be considered:

- When selecting informants and deciding on data collection methods.
- The evaluation findings and conclusions.
- The recommendations of the evaluation.

This technical note proposes an equity-based approach to evaluation that ensures that all voices, including those of marginalized groups, are heard and respected throughout the process. If

those intended to contribute information to the evaluation – often project participants, evaluation beneficiaries or stakeholders – cannot provide informed input due to lack of knowledge, access, or capacity, the evaluation risks being skewed. Equity in evaluation is not just about data collection; it involves respecting and adapting to participants’ circumstances. If an intervention was not designed from the outset with equity and equality in mind, evaluating it will be particularly challenging, especially in identifying and engaging hard-to-reach groups.

3. Who are 'hard-to-reach' populations?

There is no one definition of hard-to-reach populations in the academic and evaluation literature. While the term is widely used, it carries implications that deserve careful examination. 'Hard to reach' may create an implicit assumption of uniformity or homogeneity among the populations it describes, even though who falls into the category is specific to the context. Evaluation literature highlight, that many factors may be at play to make a population 'hard to reach', from the cultural and social environment to the purpose and scope of a given intervention and identifying which particular groups are hard to reach is an integral part of planning an evaluation or any other programme activity³. An assumption of homogeneity can also obscure the diverse and dynamic realities within and between these groups, such as their cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic or geographic differences. For example, many humanitarians and government

interventions identify hard-to-reach groups according to demographic characteristics, such as youth, rural populations, persons with disabilities, and members of ethnic minority groups, despite their vastly different needs and the barriers that they face. The implication of homogeneity can lead to oversimplified assumptions about a group, which can foster stigmatizing attitudes (Brackertz, 2007). What does typify a hard-to-reach population are the difficulties that evaluators and other researchers face in engaging with members of the group, as they are hard to find, hard to sample, hard to access, hard to persuade, and / or may need additional support (language or specialized approaches) to be able to participate. This could be for structural reasons (for instance, location, lack of means of communication), but also for cultural or social reasons, such as gendered power relations within households making it difficult for women to participate. That said, it is critical to

³ Guide 4 - Consulting with people we find hard to reach; Engaging Community Representation in Program Evaluation
Development and evaluation of culturally sensitive psychosocial interventions for under-served

people in primary care | BMC Psychiatry | Full Text; Strategies used to engage hard-to-reach populations in childhood disability research: a scoping review.

avoid generalizing hard-to-reach populations as inherently uncooperative or disadvantaged. While certain traits – such as low literacy or distrust of institutions – may be present among some people belonging to these groups, they are not universally applicable.

Describing a group as hard-to-reach may inadvertently suggest that the difficulty lies with the group itself, rather than the structural or systemic barriers that make access challenging. This can lead to further stigmatization, as the term shifts responsibility away from service providers, policies or systems onto the populations themselves, framing them as problematic or noncompliant. As a result, hard-to-reach is potentially becoming a stigmatizing term (Brackertz, 2007). Stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination in turn are likely to make a population even harder to reach. Evaluators must exercise caution not to reinforce stigmatizing narratives through categorization. Instead, the evaluation design should acknowledge the diversity within these populations and incorporate adaptive, context-specific recruitment methods and methodologies that uphold the principles of equity, confidentiality, and informed consent, as discussed in greater detail below.

To mitigate these issues, evaluators and programme staff in development organizations tend to use more specific and descriptive terms that acknowledge the diversity within these groups. For example:

- Underserved populations.
- Marginalized communities.
- Groups facing barriers to access.

These terms can help highlight the specific challenges and needs of different groups without implying homogeneity (that a group of people is uniform or the same in all important respects—that they share the same characteristics, needs, or experiences) or contributing to stigma. For example, a marginalized community might include people of different ages, ethnicities, languages, or economic situations. Treating them as a single, uniform group (homogeneous) can lead to inappropriate or ineffective policies, services, or evaluations. So, using more specific and descriptive terms helps avoid the false assumption of homogeneity and allows for better understanding and support of each group's unique challenges and circumstances.

With the adoption of Agenda 2030, the term hard to reach is interchangeably used with the principle of leave no one behind. Within UNICEF guidance there is no consistent definition for these terms. On the one hand, this lack of consistency is logical, as hard-to-reach population terms are very contextual, as discussed above. On the other hand, this may lead to lack of clarity for programming and evaluation as to who should be included in interventions.

How UNICEF identifies and engages with hard-to-reach populations?

In order to engage the groups that are hard-to-reach, in its programming UNICEF focuses on the most marginalized populations by identifying and prioritizing factors of discrimination and exclusion found in each operational context, and applies gender- and disability-sensitive approaches. For example, in vaccination programmes, UNICEF defines hard-to-reach children as those who live in remote or otherwise challenging areas where they face multiple deprivations. These deprivations extend beyond health to include nutrition, safe water, education and other essential services (Buechner, 2022).

UNICEF's evaluations emphasize equity by striving to include the voices and experiences of those who are often excluded. This involves disaggregating data to identify disparities and tailoring evaluation methods to capture the realities of hard-to-reach populations, ensuring that programs are inclusive and effective for all children (Update on UNICEF humanitarian action, 2025). In situations where movement is restricted or areas are inaccessible, UNICEF leverages technology such as satellite imagery and GPS tracking. These tools allow for the observation of population movements and the assessment of intervention impacts over time, providing valuable data that might otherwise be unattainable (Guide on alternative

approaches in data and evidence generation, UNICEF, 2020).

UNICEF's Guidance on Concepts and Processes in Data Disaggregation, 2024 presents the main concepts and uses of data disaggregation to make UNICEF programming more equitable. This document partially covers the role of disaggregation in evaluations and points to important considerations to be made in the full programme cycle, to ensure equitable programming and the leave no one behind principle.

Based on the Guidance on Concepts and Processes in Data Disaggregation, 2024 and UNCT Guide on 'Operationalising Leaving No One Behind', 2022 *factors* to consider when identifying hard-to-reach populations include:

- geographical (physical, transport / logistics, distance). For example: people living in rural, conflict-affected, mountainous, seasonally-affected areas, and people on the move;
- data gaps (disaggregation availability);
- disabilities or functional difficulties;
- emancipated or separated minors;
- social;
- cultural;
- education / literacy level;
- economic;
- religious;
- security;
- ethnicity and language;

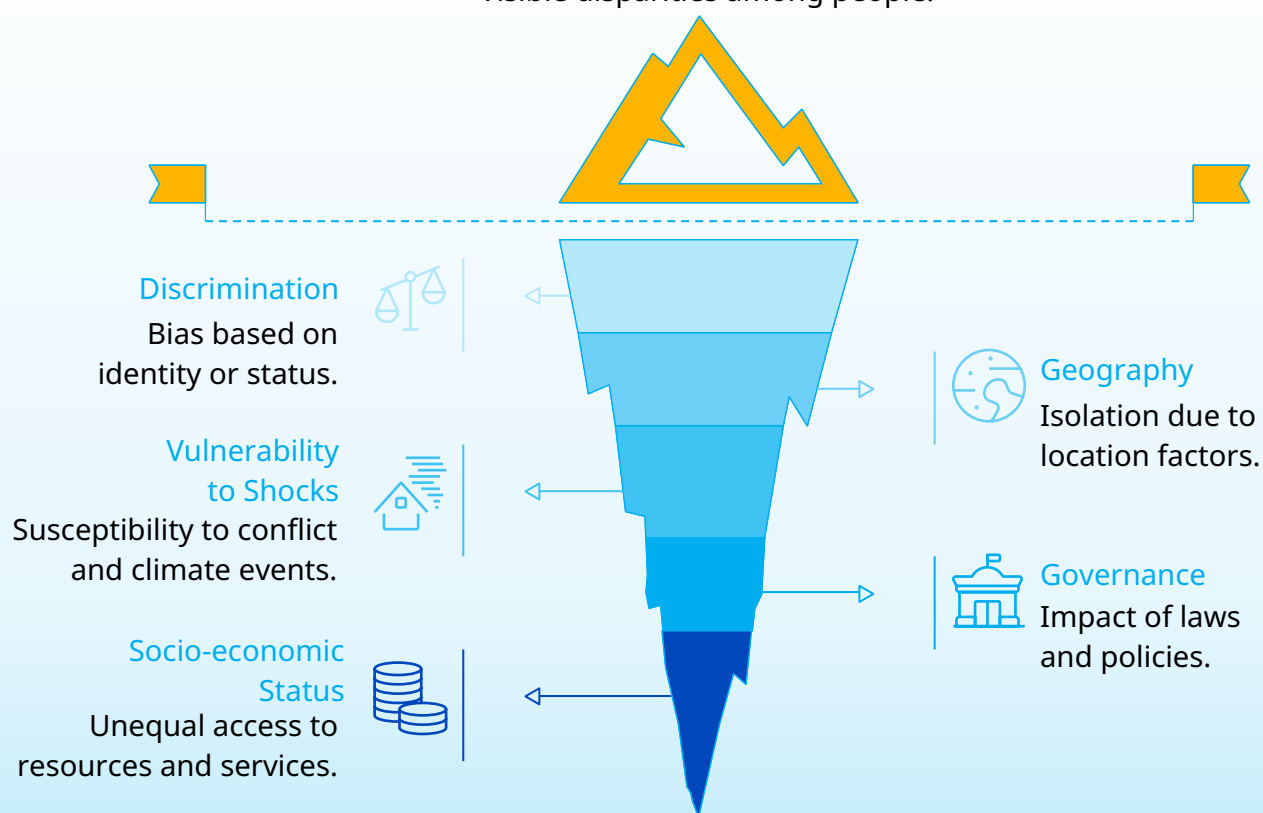
- survivors of violence;
- health-related (for example, HIV, tuberculosis);
- trust related to previous experience;
- migration and refugee status;
- registered and not registered. For example: children / people without birth certificates or legal documents may be excluded from ongoing programmes and hence from any data / evidence collection for evaluations; and
- digital divide. For example: based on access to means of communications,

technology, internet; electricity, and so forth.

To operationalize leave no one behind in its programming, UNICEF uses a human rights-based approach based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and guided by the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action. These documents should also guide identification of and engagement with hard-to-reach populations, throughout the programme cycle and including in evaluations.

Factors Contributing to People Being Left Behind.

Deprivation and Inequalities
Visible disparities among people.



Source: adapted from Guide 'Operationalizing Leaving No One Behind | Good Practice Note for UN Country Teams'; UNSDG, 2022.

Barriers to engaging with hard-to-reach populations

For many population groups, the factors discussed above intersect to create reinforcing and compounding disadvantages and deprivation for children and their families, making it likely that they will not be covered by an evaluation. That said, a group may be hard-to-reach to some extent and in some locations, but not in all circumstances, depending on the intervention and the context where the intervention is applied. Cultural, economic and social factors or lack of a sampling frame can also raise barriers to access for a particular subgroup of a population.

A number of sampling techniques and studies (Raifman et al. (2022), Ellard-Gray et al. (2015), Blukacz et al. (2023)), highlight that hard-to-reach populations often encompass mobile or 'floating' groups – such as homeless individuals and families, migrants, seasonal labourers, and transient populations – who lack a stable place of residence or consistent community ties, as well as socially invisible subgroups including families with disabilities or unregistered children. These characteristics present significant challenges for evaluators in terms of recruitment, sampling, and sustained engagement across the evaluation cycle.

Accessing such populations is further complicated by people deliberately concealing their group identity due to fear of legal repercussions or social

stigmatization. For instance, individuals engaged in criminalized behaviours (such as drug use) or those experiencing marginalization may be reluctant to participate in data collection efforts due to perceived threats to their anonymity and safety, particularly if the evaluation is exploring highly sensitive variables (such as undocumented status, or health conditions). Even where initial contact is made, participants may withhold information or disengage if trust and ethical safeguards are not robustly established.

It is also very important to take into account how beliefs, perceptions and attitudes that individuals or groups hold can contribute towards some populations being identified as hard to reach. These can significantly influence how they interact with and respond to attempts to engage them throughout the programme cycle, including during evaluations (Principles of community engagement, CDC, 2016). For example:

- **Trust in authorities:** some groups may have a deep-seated mistrust of government or external organizations, which can make them less likely to engage in evaluation processes.
- **Cultural beliefs:** cultural norms and values can affect how people perceive and accept help or engage in evaluation processes. For instance, some communities might prioritize self-reliance and view external assistance as unnecessary or intrusive, or resist sharing their

experiences with evaluators for fear of being judged or prosecuted.

- **Previous experiences:** past negative experiences with interventions can lead to scepticism and reluctance to participate in new interventions, particularly evaluations.
- **Awareness and knowledge:** a lack of awareness or understanding about available services can also be a barrier. People might not know that help exists or how to access it. As a result, even if they were engaged in interventions related to evaluated programmes, they might not realize it and their feedback on effectiveness or relevance of the programme could be limited.

By considering these attitudinal factors, evaluations can be better tailored to address the specific needs and concerns of diverse groups, leading to more effective and inclusive evidence generation. Identifying and working with 'gatekeepers' – typically high-status members of a community who may control or affect whether an evaluation team can access a hard-to-reach population – is important for securing access and can contribute to the evaluators' ability to engage with the group effectively. That said, relying on gatekeepers to negotiate access can be problematic from an ethical and inclusion- and gender-sensitive perspective, as it may reinforce rather than challenge existing patterns of power and exclusion within the group in question. As McAreavey and Das (2013, p.116) note, how gatekeepers "... deem

the world to work and the nature of social relations, along with their understanding of how knowledge is constructed, may influence the extent and circumstances under which they grant access."

A central element of evaluation for programme interventions is that these will be voluntary and country-led, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development, while respecting policy space and priorities. However, the evaluation of outcomes for reducing inequalities presents special challenges. This is because the disaggregation of data to assess differential programme outcomes on different income groups or groups with different sociocultural characteristics (for instance ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, legal status or geographical location) – including hard-to-reach groups – may challenge the data collection capacity of many national agencies. There may also be political or cultural opposition to addressing some dimensions of social exclusion, as in some contexts the special needs or even the existence of some of these groups may not be recognized by major political or social groups.

Traditionally, international support for strengthening evaluation capacity is coordinated through national planning and statistical agencies where the focus may be on the collection and analysis of basic quantitative data. Strengthening evaluation on hard-to-reach populations may involve different and more

specialized agencies. This will involve finding ways to improve cooperation between government and civil society evaluation departments. In addition to broadening the range of evaluation resources and technical expertise, many civil society organizations conduct evaluations at the community and local level, which is very important for understanding the social mechanisms that maintain inequalities and other forms of social exclusion.

Efforts to strengthen national evaluation capacity – particularly in engaging hard-to-reach populations – face several challenges. These challenges include both structural and resource-related limitations, which hinder the ability to collect inclusive, disaggregated, and meaningful data. Key issues include:

WEAK EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Many countries have underdeveloped evaluation structures that are not equipped to manage the additional demands of collecting data disaggregated by gender, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics relevant to hard-to-reach groups. Even when administrative data systems exist, they often do not capture these populations effectively. For instance, comparative data is not usually available on the access of different religious or ethnic groups to basic services. Individuals from higher wealth quantiles may be underrepresented in administrative data related to public services, as they tend to use private services more extensively.

Conversely, individuals in the lowest wealth quantiles may also be excluded due to limited or no access to public services, leading to their absence in official data systems.

VISIBILITY AND WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE

As noted above, some individuals or groups may choose not to be identified due to stigma, privacy concerns, or distrust. Additionally, governments may intentionally exclude certain populations from visibility due to political, social, or policy reasons. As a result, these groups remain invisible in national data systems. In such cases, survey data, equity-focused evaluations, and targeted studies are essential to fill critical evidence gaps and ensure inclusiveness.

FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL CONSTRAINTS

Engaging marginalized populations often requires additional financial investment and technical expertise, reflecting the need to collect additional data using new methodologies. Unfortunately, many governments and their development partners lack sufficient resources to support inclusive evaluation efforts, and the additional costs and need for greater evaluation expertise are also major disincentives for agencies working under budget and time constraints. This results in evaluations that do not fully represent the most marginalized, undermining the

validity and utility of findings for equity-focused policy and programming.

Involving hard-to-reach children in evaluations

Children up to the age of 18 typically do not have full agency to make decisions about their participation in programmes or services which may generate and record personal data (UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis, 2021). Children may also lack the understanding of the processes to assess a decision's purported risks and benefits. Privacy terms and conditions are often barely understood by educated adults, let alone children. As a result, there is a higher duty of care for children's data in evaluations.

UNICEF's policy position is that in most contexts, children – that is, all persons under the age of 18 – cannot give informed consent to participate in evaluations or any other data-collection exercise.⁴ However, a child's informed *assent* can and should always be obtained for their participation, if they are old enough to understand what they are being asked to assent to. As noted in UNICEF's *Procedure on Ethical Standards in*

Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis, 2021 "Assent is the willingness to participate in research, evaluations or data collection by persons who are by legal definition too young to give informed consent according to prevailing local law but who are old enough to understand the proposed research in general, its expected risks and possible benefits, and the activities expected of them as subjects."

Key considerations that need to be taken into account when engaging with a hard-to-reach child include:

- **Parental informed consent:** most jurisdictions require parental consent or consent from a legal guardian or other responsible adult for evaluations involving minors. This is to ensure that parents are fully informed about the evaluation process, potential risks and benefits (Posada, 2004). The nature of the consent should be determined in consultation with local communities to understand capacities and competencies (such as literacy skills), as well as local community attitudes to signing documents. Where concerns exist regarding written consent, alternate arrangements such as oral consent and / or proxy consent should be considered. The

⁴ As noted in UNICEF's guidance note on *Adolescent participation in UNICEF monitoring and evaluation* (2019), "Some countries legally recognize 'independent minors' or have clear indications of when parental or guardian consent is not required. Examples include, cases where it may be in the best interest of the child for the parent not to

know, for example when planning to interview children on experiences of violence (and concerns may exist relating to domestic violence) or, in some countries there is a blanket exception for children over a particular age participating in M&E activities related to sexual and reproductive health".

nature of the informed consent must be noted in any report of the activity (United Nations Children's Fund, Adolescent participation in UNICEF monitoring and evaluation, 2019).

- **Child's autonomy:** while children have the right to be involved in decisions about their own care, their capacity to provide informed assent varies with age and maturity. As noted above, in some cases, older children and adolescents may be able to give assent, but this is not a substitute for parental consent (Henkelman and Everall, 2001; United Nations Children's Fund, Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis, 2021).
- **Emergency situations:** in cases where immediate evaluation is necessary (for example, for health or safety reasons), professionals may proceed without parental consent, but this is typically governed by strict legal and ethical guidelines (Posada, 2004).
- **Alternative guardians:** if a parent is unavailable, consent may sometimes be obtained from a legal guardian or another authorized adult. This can include grandparents, foster parents or other caregivers (Markley, 2024).
- **Communication and documentation:** clear communication with the child

and thorough documentation of the consent process are crucial. This includes explaining the evaluation in age-appropriate language and ensuring that the child's assent is documented along with any attempts to contact the parent or guardian and obtain informed consent from them (Henkelman and Everall, 2001; United Nations Children's Fund, Adolescent participation in UNICEF monitoring and evaluation, 2019).

Navigating these challenges requires maintaining a careful balance between respecting the child's rights and ensuring legal and ethical compliance.

Summary on the challenges in engagement of hard-to-reach population

In summary, there are considerable challenges to designing and implementing evaluations that engage hard-to-reach populations – that is, equity-focused evaluations. The challenges on engagement of the hard-to-reach population across the Evaluation phases are summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1. CHALLENGES TO CARRYING OUT EVALUATIONS THAT ENGAGE HARD-TO-REACH POPULATIONS

P	STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES	METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES
PLANNING AND DESIGN	- Political resistance to equity-focused programming. - Exclusion of equity from National Evaluation Policies. - Ethical safeguards often overlooked in early planning.	- Equity-focused approaches require unfamiliar and qualitative methods. - Ethical safeguards require time and institutional review.
DATA COLLECTION	- Legal restrictions on collecting sensitive data (for example, race, ethnicity, religion). - Vulnerable populations often lack formal identification. - Consent is harder to obtain from hard-to-reach populations.	- High costs and time required to reach hard-to-reach populations. - Limited resources for translation and lack of culturally appropriate consent forms. - Risk of retraumatizing already vulnerable groups.
ANALYSIS	- Lack of disaggregated data hinders identification of exclusion. - Time pressure may lead to analysing only easily accessible samples.	- Requires nuanced approaches to intra-household and socioeconomic disparities. - Ethical data analysis often deprioritized due to timelines.
REPORTING AND USE	- Accountability focused upward (donors), not toward communities. - Findings rarely returned to participants or used to empower them.	- Reporting formats often exclude community feedback. - Data may be presented in ways that overlook local context and equity insights.

4. Conceptual framework for equity in evaluation



For UNICEF, equity means that all children have an opportunity to survive, develop and reach their full potential, without discrimination, bias or favouritism (UNICEF's Equity Strategy for Children, 2010–2015). Reflecting this commitment, UNICEF applies equity-focused evaluation to engage those who are hard-to-reach.

An equity-focused evaluation, according to Bamberger and Segone (2011, p. 9, writing for UNICEF), "...is a judgment made of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability ... of policies, programmes and projects concerned with achieving equitable development results." This involves a rigorous, systematic and objective process for the design, analysis and interpretation of information in order to answer specific questions, including those of concern to worst-off groups, to provide assessments of what works and what does not work to reduce inequity, and highlight intended and unintended results for hard-to-reach groups (ibid). In this way, an equity-focused evaluation provides strategic lessons to guide decision makers and to inform stakeholders.

Equity-focused evaluation affects everyone engaged in the process, including those who use evaluation findings. Its primary aim is not only to shed light on the factors that impede equity, but also to analyse and assess interventions, investments and strategies through a lens of promoting equity. (Integrating Cultural Competence and Equity: Equitable Evaluation" by Dean-

Coffey, Casey, and Caldwell, *The Foundation Review*, 2014).

One of the challenges in applying equitable frameworks to evaluation is that many of the analytical approaches are very data intensive and are more difficult to apply in countries with limited national statistics. The situation in many countries has become so complex, that a one-off-approach for the evaluation of hard-to-reach populations is problematic.

Within UNICEF, equity-focused evaluations look at structural bottlenecks and power relationships and use an empowerment approach. In humanitarian evaluations, coverage, connectedness and coherence of interventions are also addressed (Bamberger and Segone, 2011).

UNICEF has developed comprehensive resources to support the implementation of equity-focused evaluations:

- **How to Design and Manage Equity-Focused Evaluations:** This guide provides practical steps for planning, conducting, and utilizing evaluations with an equity focus. It covers topics such as developing evaluation questions, selecting appropriate methods, and ensuring stakeholder engagement.
- **Evaluation for Equitable Development Results:** This publication offers insights into the theoretical underpinnings of equity-focused evaluations and presents case studies demonstrating their application in various contexts.

- **Monitoring Results for Equity System (MoRES):** MoRES is UNICEF's approach to monitoring and evaluating programs with an equity lens. It provides a framework for identifying and addressing bottlenecks that hinder equitable outcomes.

Based on the UNICEF's guide "How to design and manage equity-focused evaluations, 2012, any choice made about evaluation processes and methods has potential equity implications, which need to be considered across the four

dimensions of the evaluation (see Table 2):

- equity in the intervention
- equity in the evaluation process
- equity in the evaluation design
- equity in the data

The dimensions of an equity-focused evaluation are foundational components that ensure the evaluation process and its results contribute meaningfully to reducing disparities and promoting fairness.

TABLE 2. DIMENSIONS OF AN EQUITY-FOCUSED EVALUATION

D	FOCUS	KEY QUESTIONS
EQUITY IN THE INTERVENTION	• Whether the program or policy itself targets the most disadvantaged and marginalized populations.	• Does the intervention aim to reduce inequalities? • Are resources allocated to those most in need? • Are the intended outcomes relevant for vulnerable groups?
EQUITY IN THE EVALUATION	• The manner in which the evaluation is conducted, including who is involved and how.	• Are stakeholders, especially marginalized groups, meaningfully engaged in the evaluation? • Are their voices included in planning, implementation, and analysis? • Is the process transparent, inclusive, and respectful of cultural and contextual differences?

EQUITY IN THE EVALUATION DESIGN	• The technical setup of the evaluation – methodology, indicators, and analysis framework.	• Is the evaluation designed to detect differential impacts across diverse groups? • Are methods appropriate for collecting disaggregated data (e.g., by gender, location, income, ethnicity)? • Does it consider complexity and context to avoid oversimplified conclusions?
EQUITY IN THE DATA	• The quality and use of data to uncover and address inequalities.	• Is the data disaggregated by relevant social dimensions? • Does the analysis reveal inequities in both access and outcomes? • Are data collection tools adapted to reach underrepresented or vulnerable groups?

Equity in the intervention

Interventions must be relevant to the context and needs of hard-to-reach populations, ensuring effective measures for uptake and promotion, and non-stigmatizing entry points. Analysing bottlenecks to inclusion of hard-to-reach populations in interventions and conducting equity-based situation analysis are crucial for including these populations in interventions, considering equity, gender and social differentiation. This analysis supports developing a theory of change (ToC) as a structured process requiring good understanding of the situation of hard-to-reach populations, identifying target groups, and outlining short- and long-term changes through specific activities. An equity-informed ToC is essential for monitoring and evaluation. Intervention targets and results should reflect

changes in the lives of these population groups, not just measure input and output levels. The ToC should be regularly reviewed and updated to stay relevant to changing needs and newly identified target groups.

For example, implementing pilots and models in ‘ideal’ locations makes little sense for scaling up to hard-to-reach populations, who often live in disadvantaged and / or isolated areas. Interventions must have exit plans with hard-to-reach populations in mind to ensure the intervention results are sustained once the pilot ends.

Equity in the evaluation process

Before an evaluation starts, the Terms of Reference (ToR) must be developed with the relevant population and stakeholder groups. ToR must have the issues of equity and

inequality embedded throughout the document and highlighted in each evaluation stage. Local researchers / experts / evaluators must be included in ToR as part of the evaluation team, should one be engaged, or national consultants should be identified to conduct the evaluation. Local experts should be responsible for all stages of the evaluation and have an equal status to that of any international experts.

Most evaluation designs are fixed and the groups to be disaggregated identified at the start. However, when new, unexpected issues and populations arise, the fixed design cannot generally accommodate them and it is impossible to identify patterns of results for the groups which were not evident at the beginning (Bamberger and Segone, 2011). It is therefore sensible to have a certain level of flexibility and creativity to avoid situations where population groups remain hidden from evaluations. Ensuring the evaluation process creates opportunities for the meaningful participation of hard-to-reach populations in the evaluation across its cycles is important to help understand the lived experiences of those who suffer from inequality, inequity, and injustice.

The dissemination plan for the evaluation needs to be discussed and prepared from the start of the process to decide who is invited to the presentation of preliminary findings and how the findings will be disseminated, what evaluation products will look like, where and when those products will be distributed, and what

the evaluation management response process will look like.

Equity in the evaluation design

The design of equity-focused evaluations requires time, flexibility and creativity to reach and recruit hard-to-reach participants effectively. It is crucial to have the right analytical framework, methodology, process, ethical framework and dissemination plan to ensure that the design is inclusive and considerate of these groups. Identifying and understanding who these groups are in any given context will make the design more locally applicable.

The design should also take into account the fact that hard-to-reach groups might be unwilling, or unable to join the evaluation, as discussed above. An equity-focused process will help engage these groups in the evaluation, and establishing rapport with respondents is crucial. Recruiting and training persons from hard-to-reach populations as peer researchers can be beneficial. Accessing these groups through NGOs, respected community figures (gatekeepers – discussed above) or institutions, and providing materials in local languages can also help build trust with participants.

Various data collection tools (especially in-person techniques for community engagement) must consider customs, language, dialect, literacy rates, and learning difficulties and different learning styles, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. Formulating

the right questions and sub-questions to explore how the intervention benefits hard-to-reach populations, or excludes them, is essential. Appropriate methods, data sources and respondents are required to answer these questions effectively.

As with any other personal data, it is crucial to assess risks associated with processing to ensure that the data of hard-to-reach populations are properly and safely collected, managed and stored. This is particularly the case in regard to storing data relating to children. Most importantly, these data should be used to improve interventions.

Equity in the data

Data inclusiveness for hard-to-reach populations depends on the evaluation methodology, data collection approaches, and the design of the intervention itself. Different sources and methods of data collection are required to ensure that the data collected include these populations and go beyond traditional disaggregation by sex, rural / urban location, age, and so on. This ensures that the effects of interventions on those populations are well understood, and ensures sufficient detail in reporting demographic and other relevant characteristics.

To make data on hard-to-reach populations available, it is important to note in the evaluation design that such populations can be hidden and hard to detect, but are not necessarily small or rare. Any statistical and administrative

data available on such groups need to be explored. The data obtained should include estimates of the intervention's impact on hard-to-reach groups to reduce their vulnerability and understand how the intervention is benefiting them or not. For this, the right sampling approach or a combination of sampling approaches will be important.

Sampling calculation for hard-to-reach populations

Sampling for evaluations has evolved from social science research. When no sampling frame exists and traditional survey techniques cannot be used, techniques specifically designed for hard-to-reach populations have been proposed and used (Magnani et al., 2005; Spreen, 1992). Examples of such sampling techniques are snowball (Goodman, 1961) and respondent-driven (Heckathorn, 1997), both discussed in more detail below.

Other sampling techniques for use with hard-to-reach populations include network (Birnbaum and Sirken, 1965; Granovetter, 1976; Sudman et al., 1988), targeted (Watters and Biernacki, 1989), random walk (Klov Dahl, 1989), adaptive cluster (Thompson and Seber, 1996), time-space (Mackellar et al., 1996; Muhib et al., 2001) and link-tracing (Chow and Thompson, 2003; Félix-Medina and Thompson, 2004; Thompson and Frank, 2000). Capture-recapture is another method to estimate a population size (Ruiz et al., 2016). These techniques

generally involve significant time and resource commitments and may not be appropriate in a humanitarian setting where existing population data may be unreliable.

Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, is a nonprobability technique used to reach hidden or hard-to-reach populations—groups that are often underrepresented in traditional data collection methods. In this approach, an initial participant refers others from their social networks, helping researchers gain access to populations such as undocumented adolescents, child labourers, children with disabilities, or survivors of gender-based violence (UNICEF, 2012).

This method is particularly relevant to UNICEF's equity mandate, which prioritizes including the most marginalized children and families in data and evaluations. For instance, UNICEF's Evaluation of the Adolescent Development Programme in Jordan used snowball sampling to reach out-of-school youth and adolescents living in informal tented settlements, ensuring their perspectives were captured (UNICEF, 2019). Similarly, in the Evaluation of the Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation in West Africa, snowball sampling enabled the inclusion of young women and girls from rural and conservative communities, who were unlikely to participate through conventional sampling frames (UNICEF, 2021).

Respondent-driven sampling

Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS), first introduced by Heckathorn (1997), is a chain-referral sampling technique particularly effective for accessing hidden, marginalized, or hard-to-reach populations. These include populations for whom no sampling frame exists—such as street-connected children, adolescents engaged in sex work, or displaced young people living outside formal systems. RDS leverages the social networks of these individuals, enabling each respondent to recruit peers from their own network in successive waves.

Unlike basic snowball sampling, RDS integrates a mathematical weighting model to adjust for the non-random recruitment process. This allows for the statistical analysis and generalization of results to the broader population of interest. The methodology draws on Markov chain theory and biased network theory to address bias and variance in the sample, resulting in a statistically valid approach even when traditional probability sampling is not feasible.

In alignment with UNICEF's Evaluation Policy (2023) and Equity Strategy (2010–2015), which emphasize inclusive, rights-based, and equity-focused evaluation, RDS has been instrumental in evaluating programmes designed to “leave no one behind.” For instance, RDS was used in evaluations of HIV prevention initiatives targeting adolescent key populations in West and Central Africa, where standard household surveys would not have been

effective. It has also been applied in post-emergency settings to assess access to education for unregistered or stateless children.

By enabling systematic data collection from marginalized groups, RDS supports UNICEF's commitment to equity in data, evaluation design, and intervention reach, in line with its mandate to ensure all children have the opportunity to survive, thrive, and reach their full potential, regardless of circumstance (UNICEF, 2010; UNICEF Evaluation Policy, 2023).

Although snowball sampling is prone to biases—such as overrepresentation of individuals with large social networks—a more rigorous variation known as respondent-driven sampling (RDS) can reduce these biases and allow for statistical inference under certain conditions. These methods have also helped map social networks within these groups, improving the design of peer-based outreach programs.

By applying snowball and respondent-driven sampling, UNICEF evaluations ensure that even the most invisible and excluded children and adolescents are heard, aligning with the organization's commitment to equity, inclusion, and evidence-based programming.

Equity, risk and ethics

Equity also has an ethical aspect. Treating people equally or the same way can, in some cases, be unethical. For example, using written surveys or questionnaires with persons who are illiterate or cannot read the language in which the document is written would be unethical. Using a format that everyone can understand is both equitable and ethical (Donnelly, 2014). Unacknowledged bias on the part of evaluators also poses a significant ethical risk to the integrity of an equity-focused evaluation and its findings (Lyu, Li and Li, 2024).

Based on the UNICEF's guide "How to Design and Manage Equity-Focused Evaluations" (2012), both of these issues can be addressed by taking into account the following considerations when planning or implementing an equity-focused evaluation:

- **intersectionality**: examining how multiple identities and factors intersect to produce unique experiences of equity.
- **positionality**: acknowledging the evaluator's own biases, privileges and cultural background; and
- **reflexivity**: regularly reflecting on and adjusting the evaluation process to ensure equity and cultural competence.⁵

⁵ According to UNESCO, cultural or intercultural competences "... refer to having adequate relevant knowledge about particular cultures, as well as general

knowledge about the sorts of issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive

As the authors of one literature review on the medical sphere and education conclude (Lyu, Li and Li, 2024), those wishing to engage with the hard-to-reach children need to overcome their own prejudice about these children and their families to work with them effectively. This includes:

- **Self-reflection:** evaluators need to engage in self-reflection to recognize and understand their own biases. This involves being aware of stereotypes and how they might influence interactions with children and families.
- **Training and education:** ongoing training in cultural competence and anti-bias education can help evaluators to develop the skills needed to engage effectively with diverse populations.
- **Building trust:** establishing trust is crucial. This can be achieved by showing respect, being consistent, and demonstrating genuine care and commitment. Trust-building is a gradual process that requires patience and persistence.
- **Inclusive practices:** adopting inclusive practices that respect and value the diversity of families can help overcome barriers. This includes using culturally sensitive

communication and being flexible in meeting the needs of families.

- **Understanding barriers:** recognizing the barriers that make families hard-to-reach, such as socioeconomic challenges, cultural differences, or past negative experiences with institutions.
- **Tailored approaches:** developing strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of each family. This might include flexible scheduling, providing support in a non-judgmental manner and collaborating with community organizations.
- **Empathy and respect:** approaching families with empathy and respect, acknowledging their unique circumstances and strengths. This helps in building a positive relationship and encouraging engagement (Lyu, Li and Li, 2024).

Incorporating these elements into equity-focused evaluations are essential in order to identify and address inequalities; promote social justice and equality; empower marginalized communities; inform evidence-based policy and programming; and foster a culture of equity and inclusion (UNICEF, 2012).

attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others, as well as having the skills required to draw upon both knowledge and attitudes when

interacting with others from different cultures.” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2013, p.16).

5. Evaluation approaches and methods for hard-to-reach populations

Which evaluation approach should be used for hard-to-reach populations?

Impact Evaluation



Determines if an intervention produces change, focusing on equity.

Theory-Based Approaches

Unpacks the mechanisms of change, mapping assumptions and outcomes.

Participatory Approaches

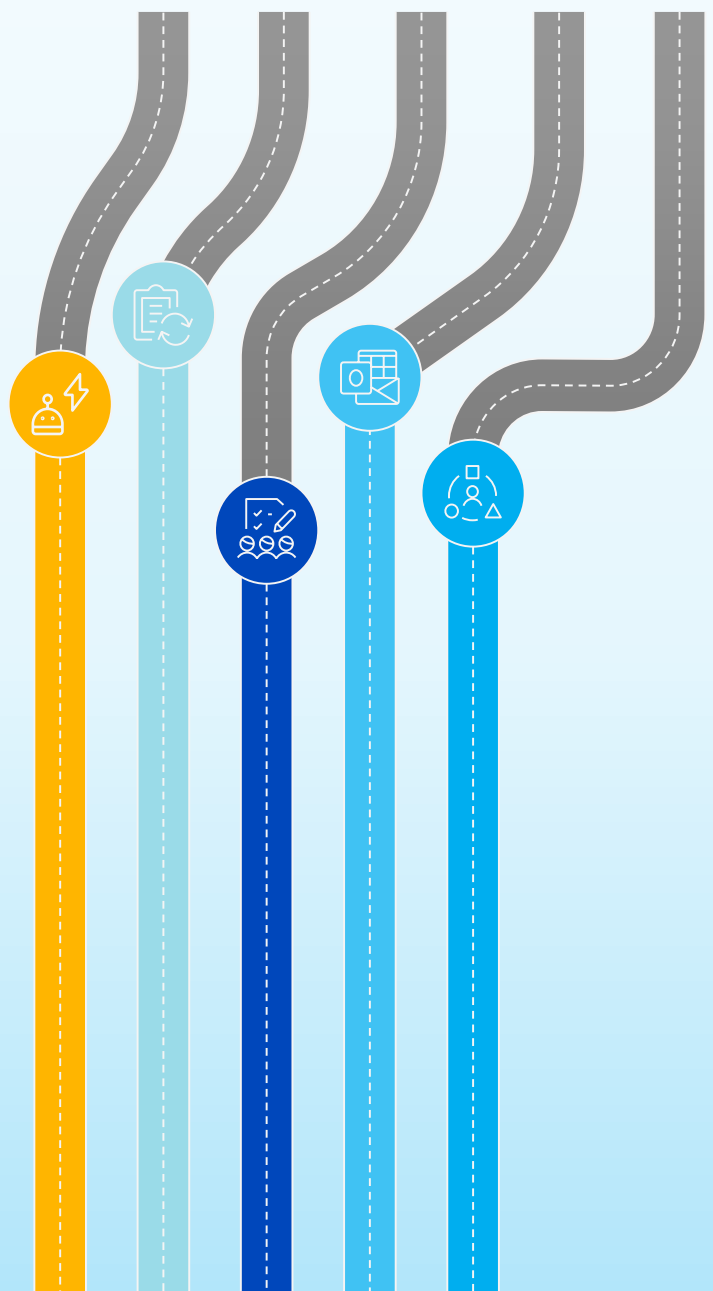
Prioritizes community ownership and co-creation.

Outcome-Oriented Approaches

Identifies and assesses intended and unintended outcomes.

Synthesis and Complex Designs

Addresses multilayered systems and compound exclusion.



The development of cost-effective and easy-to-apply, complexity-responsive methodologies is both a challenge and an opportunity for proved, equity-focused evaluations. A starting point to identifying and systematizing the approaches in reaching the most hard-to-reach populations and especially children is the application of the following standards:

Informed consent, cultural sensitivity, do not harm, child-friendly methodologies, confidentiality and protection.

- Adaptation of data collection methods (mobile data collection; use of technologies; partnerships with local organizations; facilitators / extenders; remote survey; mixed methods).
- Inclusive data analysis (data disaggregation; addressing biases).

Most evaluations are designed using quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods (where both qualitative and quantitative methods are used) (Bamberger, Segone and Tateossian, 2016). Perrenoud, Bataille and Elcheroth (2023) argue that to ensure that hard-to-reach populations are included, evaluations should adopt a mixed-methods approach to combine understanding of lived experiences in different kinds of households, communities and economic activities (qualitative evaluation) with an estimate of the breadth and representation of findings, and the statistical significance of observed differences (quantitative evaluation).

Ensuring the inclusion of hard-to-reach populations in evaluations requires adaptive, inclusive, and equity-sensitive approaches. These approaches must be methodologically sound and ethically robust to reflect the lived realities of marginalized groups, and avoid reinforcing systemic exclusions. Below is a structured overview of the primary evaluation approaches suitable for such contexts.

Impact evaluation

Impact evaluation assesses whether and how an intervention caused observed changes, and is fundamental for equity-focused assessments. An impact evaluation can include:

- **Experimental designs** (such as randomized controlled trials – RCTs): Participants are randomly assigned to treatment and control groups to isolate the impact of the intervention. With hard-to-reach populations, **ethical** (use culturally sensitive informed consent (e.g., oral, visual), avoid coercion, and engage community advisors) and **logistical** (apply flexible methods (e.g., home visits, mobile tools), cluster randomization, and pilot testing) adaptations are essential to avoid exclusion or coercion (UNICEF, 2012).
- **Quasi-experimental designs** (such as propensity score matching, difference-in-differences): These are used where randomization is not feasible. They help to control

for selection bias and are effective in real-world settings where hard-to-reach groups may self-select or face systematic barriers to access (UNICEF, 2012).

- **Causal machine learning (CML):** Combines machine learning with causal inference to uncover heterogeneous treatment effects. CML is especially useful for understanding what works for whom, leveraging high-dimensional data from diverse populations. Tools like causal forests allow policymakers to go beyond “what works on average” to “what works for which subgroup” (Salverda, 2021).
- **Mixed-methods approaches:** These combine qualitative and quantitative tools to explore both statistical patterns and lived experiences. They are particularly beneficial for understanding barriers, perceptions, and context-specific nuances of marginalized groups (Perrenoud, Bataille and Elcheroth, 2023).

Theory-based approaches

These methods focus on understanding how and why an intervention brings about change:

- **Theory of change (ToC):** Articulates assumptions, pathways, and expected outcomes. ToC is central for evaluating interventions in complex contexts, especially when involving excluded or overlooked groups (Connell and Kubisch, 1998).
- **Contribution analysis:** Helps determine whether an intervention plausibly contributed to observed results, based on a clear results chain and iterative data validation (Apgar and Levine, 2024).
- **Realist evaluation:** Explores “what works, for whom, under what conditions, and why” using context-mechanism-outcome configurations. This method is particularly useful in dynamic or politically sensitive settings (Adams et al., 2016).

Participatory and empowerment approaches

These approaches prioritize community ownership, voice, and co-creation:

- **Participatory action research (PAR):** Engages community members as co-researchers. PAR strengthens trust and empowers marginalized populations (McGarvey, 2007).
- **Empowerment evaluation:** Supports communities in evaluating their own programmes and building self-determination capacities (Fetterman, 2021)
- **Collaborative evaluation:** Involves stakeholders throughout all stages of the evaluation. Builds relevance and credibility of findings, particularly when inclusion of hard-to-reach populations is prioritized (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023).

Outcome-oriented approaches

Outcome harvesting: Identifies outcomes (intended or not) and works backwards to assess whether and how an intervention contributed. Effective in non-linear and dynamic environments, such as peacebuilding or advocacy work (Blundo-Canto, 2024).

Social return on investment (SROI): Calculates the broader social, environmental, and economic value generated relative to costs. Useful for illustrating the added value of inclusive programming (Rauscher, Schober and Millner, 2012).

Synthesis and complex evaluation designs

In complex or fragmented systems, multiple evaluation designs may be used together:

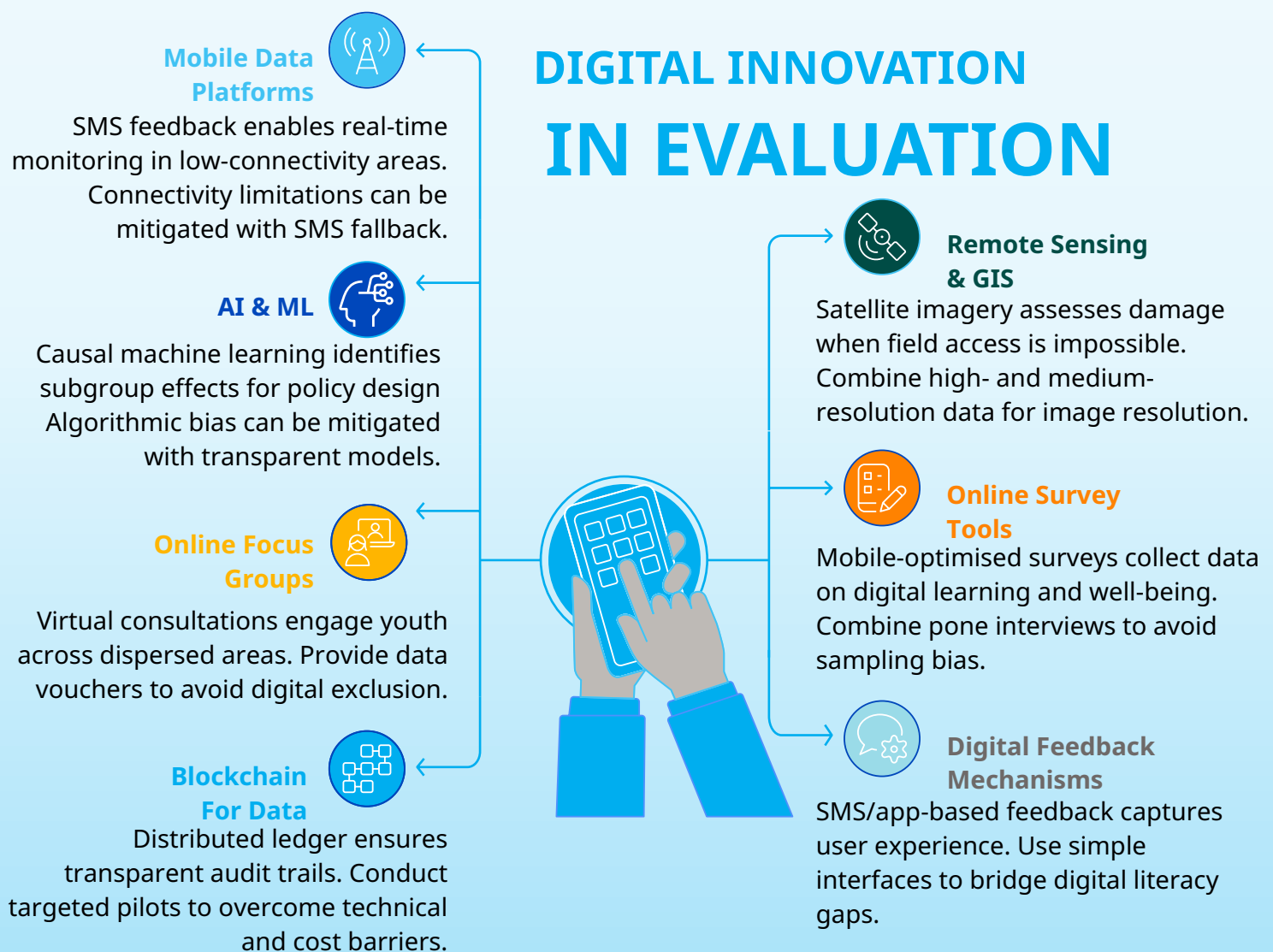
- **Review and synthesis methods** (for example meta-analysis, realist synthesis).
- **Complexity-responsive approaches**, such as simulation, systems mapping, or network analysis.
- **Ethnographic and case-based methods** that deepen understanding of social norms and structural exclusion.

This structure aligns with the guidance in Bamberger, Segone and Tateossian (2016) and builds on equity- and gender-responsive methodologies.

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for every child, **every right**
for every child, **informed consent**
for every child, **cultural sensitivity**
for every child, **do no harm**
for every child, **child-friendly methodologies**
for every child, **confidentiality and protection**
for every child, **inclusive data analysis**
for every child, **adaptive methods**
for every child, **ethical safeguards**

6. Hard-to-reach populations and digitalization



UNICEF's mandate—to uphold

the rights of every child, especially the most marginalized—demands innovative approaches that ensure inclusion in both data collection and program evaluation. Aligned with the UNICEF Evaluation Policy (2023), which prioritizes equity-focused, ethical, and participatory evaluation practices, digital and technological innovations offer untapped potential for advancing this mandate.

UNICEF has actively expanded the use of digital technologies to support children, particularly those who are hardest to reach. These efforts intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic, with technologies primarily deployed in programme design, needs assessments, and emergency response. However, there is increasing recognition of the potential to apply these technologies more directly to evaluation processes.

As highlighted by Bamberger, Segone, and Tateossian (2016), digital technologies can help evaluators “catch up” with the complex challenges of evaluating in real time, across fragmented populations, and under resource constraints. Yet, ethical, legal, and political concerns must be addressed—particularly regarding privacy, data security, informed consent, and access to digital tools. A growing concern is that big data may be extractive, removing agency from communities by gathering insights without their knowledge or participation.

UNICEF's work reflects an awareness of these risks and the need for rights-based, child-sensitive data approaches. This includes promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in digital evaluations, consistent with the “Responsible Data for Children” (RD4C) principles developed with The GovLab (UNICEF & GovLab, n.d.).

Examples of Digital Innovation in Evaluation Aligned with UNICEF's Mandate include:



Mobile Data Collection Platforms

Example: RapidPro (UNICEF).

Used in humanitarian evaluations in Nigeria and Uganda (e.g., U-Report), RapidPro enables real-time feedback and monitoring through SMS and messaging, even in low-connectivity areas.



Remote Sensing & GIS

Example: Rapid Damage Assessment in Conflict Zones: Gaza Strip.

UNICEF has effectively utilized remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in various evaluations to enhance program effectiveness and reach, particularly in challenging environments. Following escalated hostilities in Gaza, UNICEF employed remote sensing and geospatial analysis to assess damage to over 318 schools, many serving as shelters for displaced families. This strategy enabled rapid, remote evaluations when field access was restricted, allowing UNICEF to prioritize relief efforts and enhance

emergency responses for children in need.

Despite their value, such technologies face challenges, including data resolution limitations, satellite access during conflict, and the need for local validation to ensure accuracy in fast-evolving contexts.



Artificial Intelligence & Machine Learning (AI/ML)

Example: Causal Machine Learning for Policy Design in Kazakhstan.

UNICEF's Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) has been pioneering the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) into its evaluation practices to enhance evidence generation, policy design, and program effectiveness. Below are notable examples illustrating this innovative approach. In collaboration with Kazakhstan's Ministry of Digital Development, Innovations, and Aerospace Industry, UNICEF ECARO initiated a project employing causal machine learning techniques to inform and enhance policy design.

This initiative involves:

- **Data Quality Assessment:** Evaluating the completeness and reliability of existing datasets.
- **Capacity Building:** Organizing training sessions for the ministry's data science team, led by UNICEF's AI advisor, to build expertise in causal inference methodologies.
- **Algorithm Development:** Creating prototype algorithms to analyse policy impacts, with ongoing progress tracked through monthly reports and updates.

UNICEF's Evaluation Office has developed "*Operational framework for Machine Learning in evaluation*" (UNICEF, 2024) to guide the application of machine learning in evaluations. This framework categorizes data into three types—structured, unstructured, and big data—and recommends appropriate ML methods for each. It provides practical guidance for evaluation managers aiming to incorporate ML approaches into their projects, enhancing the capacity to process large volumes of data efficiently.

Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) in evaluations presents unique challenges when addressing hard-to-reach populations—groups that often lack representation in digital datasets due to poverty, displacement, or limited access to technology. These populations frequently fall outside structured data systems, leading to algorithmic bias and poor model performance. The digital divide compounds this issue, with ML tools skewing toward connected, urban users while excluding marginalized groups like rural children, migrants, or those with disabilities. This undermines the equity goals central to UNICEF's Evaluation Policy and the broader child rights mandate.

Moreover, ethical concerns such as data privacy, consent, and the profiling of children add serious risks, particularly in contexts where AI tools operate as opaque “black boxes.” Without robust governance, inclusive validation methods, and alignment with frameworks like the Responsible Data for Children (RD4C) principles, ML-driven evaluations may inadvertently cause harm or reinforce exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires localized technical capacity, ethical oversight, and mixed-methods triangulation to ensure that AI enhances—rather than hinders—efforts to leave no one behind.



Online Survey Tools

Example: Remote Data Collection in ECARO during COVID-19.

Aligned with UNICEF’s Evaluation Policy (2023), which emphasizes ethical, inclusive, and innovative data collection methods, online survey tools have become essential in reaching dispersed or hard-to-reach populations, especially during crises.

In UNICEF ECARO, online surveys were widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic to evaluate the impact of school closures and digital learning. For example, in North Macedonia and Kyrgyzstan, UNICEF deployed mobile-optimized surveys through platforms like KoboToolbox and SurveyMonkey to collect data from adolescents, caregivers, and teachers on access to remote education, digital literacy, and psychosocial wellbeing.

Challenges identified:

- Sampling bias, excluding households without internet or digital devices.
- Survey fatigue and low response rates, especially among marginalized groups.
- Language and accessibility barriers, requiring local adaptation and support.
- Ethical concerns around consent, especially with children and youth.

To address these, ECARO evaluations increasingly used mixed methods, combining online surveys with phone interviews and focus groups, and applied safeguards such as digital consent protocols.



Online Focus Groups and Interviews

Example: Evaluation of youth engagement programs in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina

UNICEF has increasingly used online focus groups and remote interviews to gather qualitative data during evaluations, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic and in fragile contexts. For instance, in the evaluation of youth engagement programs in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, virtual platforms allowed UNICEF to consult adolescents, civil society actors, and service providers across dispersed locations. While digital methods expanded reach and reduced logistical costs, several challenges were observed:

- **Digital Exclusion:** Limited internet access and device availability among marginalized groups (e.g., Roma communities, children with disabilities) affected equitable participation.
- **Privacy and Safeguarding:** Ensuring confidentiality in home settings—especially for adolescents—was difficult, raising concerns about consent and safety.
- **Quality of Data:** Rapport-building and open expression were sometimes hindered by technological constraints or participants' discomfort with digital formats.
- **Sampling Bias:** Recruitment favoured digitally literate participants, potentially skewing perspectives away from the most vulnerable.

These experiences underline the importance of using mixed modalities, providing digital access support, and tailoring ethical protocols when conducting remote qualitative evaluations in diverse contexts.



Digital Feedback Mechanisms

Example: UNICEF ECARO (2021). Evaluation of Child Protection Interventions for Refugee and Migrant Children in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In line with UNICEF's Evaluation Policy (2023), which emphasizes participatory approaches and the inclusion of affected populations in evaluation processes, digital feedback mechanisms have

become essential tools for collecting timely, user-centred data. For instance, in Serbia and Moldova, UNICEF-supported initiatives integrated SMS-based and app-based feedback systems to capture the experiences of service users, including unaccompanied minors and youth in shelters. These tools allowed evaluators to gather continuous, anonymized feedback on service accessibility, safety, and responsiveness. *Challenges included:* Digital literacy gaps, especially among children and marginalized groups; Data privacy risks, particularly with sensitive protection services; Ensuring meaningful use of feedback loops for accountability and program adaptation.



Blockchain for Data Integrity

Example: UNICEF ECARO (2021). Evaluation of UNICEF's Support to Migrant and Refugee Children in the Balkans.

UNICEF's Evaluation Policy (2023) highlights the importance of credible, transparent, and ethically managed data systems—especially in equity-focused evaluations. In response, blockchain technology has been piloted to enhance data integrity, ensuring tamper-proof records and transparent audit trails in evaluations and program monitoring.

While not yet widespread in evaluations, UNICEF Innovation has piloted blockchain-based solutions through its Ventures Fund, supporting initiatives that test distributed ledgers for digital identity and service tracking. In UNICEF

ECARO, lessons from these pilots are being explored in child protection and cash assistance evaluations, particularly in migration contexts such as Montenegro and Serbia, where trust in data systems is critical. For example, evaluators examining the distribution of social services to unaccompanied minors and refugee families have noted the potential of blockchain to: Safeguard sensitive records; Track entitlements and

service usage across jurisdictions; Improve data reliability for vulnerable, mobile populations.

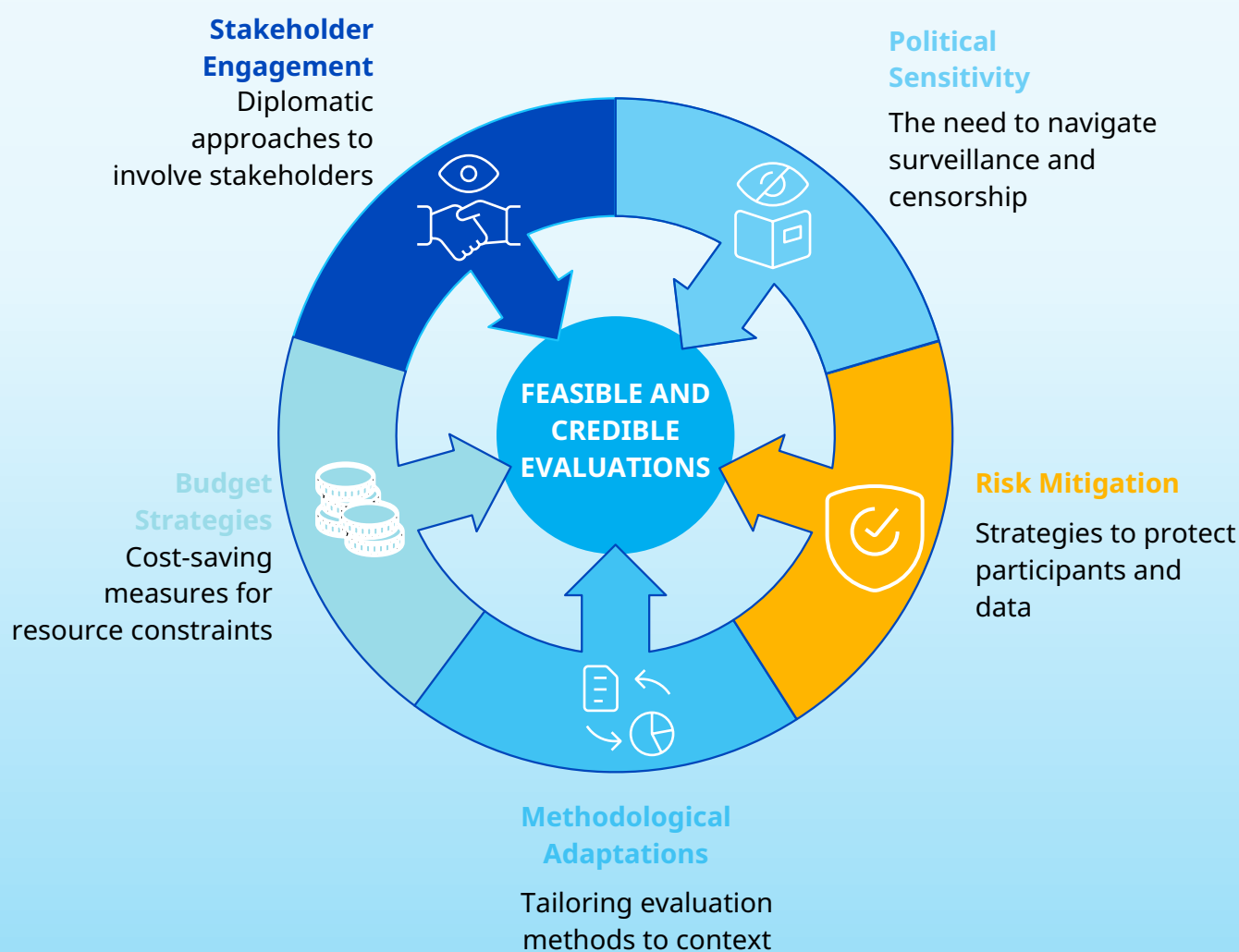
Challenges include: High technical complexity and cost; Regulatory and data protection compliance (e.g., GDPR in the EU); Limited digital infrastructure and capacity in some country offices.

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for every child, **every right**
for every child, **digital access**
for every child, **data privacy**
for every child, **community insights**
for every child, **tech literacy**
for every child, **secure data**
for every child, **participatory methods**
for every child, **digital solutions**
for every child, **inclusive tech**

7. Equity-focused evaluations in politically sensitive settings

Ensuring Feasible and Credible Equity Evaluations



According to the UNICEF Evaluation Policy (2023), equity-focused evaluations aim to shed light on disparities and the factors affecting the

most marginalized children. However, conducting such evaluations in countries where governments are reluctant to

support an equity agenda can pose significant challenges.

In countries where governments may be unsupportive of equity-focused evaluations, the safety of evaluators and participants becomes a primary concern, outweighing methodological or political challenges. UNICEF's Evaluation Policy (2023) emphasizes the imperative of "do no harm", ethical rigor, and safeguarding for all individuals involved in evaluation activities. These issues are difficult to address as they often combine political, financial and technical or capacity questions.

Evaluators operating in such environments face the risk of:

- Surveillance, intimidation, or obstruction by authorities when engaging with marginalized populations or investigating sensitive issues;
- Participants being exposed to retaliation, particularly if they belong to politically excluded or stigmatized groups (e.g., Roma communities, LGBTQ+ youth, undocumented migrants);
- Censorship or manipulation of findings, where governments restrict publication or dissemination of data that highlight inequities or governance failures;
- Jeopardizing UNICEF's operations and relationships, especially if findings contradict national narratives or priorities.

Risk mitigation measures, consistent with UNICEF's policy and human rights-based approach, should include:

- Thorough risk assessments during inception;
- Contingency planning for fieldwork interruptions or backlash;
- Ethical clearance and secure data protocols;
- Strong coordination with UNICEF's Child Safeguarding and Security focal points.

Main obstacles in evaluations in politically sensitive environments include:

- Institutional preference for existing indicators that mask inequalities, obstructing efforts to assess true progress on poverty, education, and social inclusion.
- Limited national capacity or political will to allocate resources for complex or participatory methodologies that involve marginalized voices.
- Risks to evaluators and participants, including threats to confidentiality, fears of surveillance, and self-censorship.

Drawing on Realist Evaluation—which seeks to understand "what works, for whom, in what contexts, and why"—UNICEF ECARO has encountered cases where contextual resistance influenced evaluation design and use. For example, in evaluations related to Roma inclusion and child migration in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, evaluators faced government reluctance to engage with or report on vulnerable groups, such as

undocumented migrants, children with disabilities, or ethnic minorities. In one case, a national counterpart opposed disaggregating data by ethnicity, fearing political backlash. In certain evaluations, UNICEF had to anonymize locations and findings to avoid jeopardizing operations and local partnerships.

To navigate these constraints, ECARO evaluations have used adaptive and context-sensitive approaches, including:

- Phased or embedded evaluations, starting with formative research;
- Confidential data handling protocols;
- Diplomatic stakeholder engagement, positioning findings as constructive for national development.

Working under budget constraints

As was described above, ensuring inclusion of a hard-to-reach population may be costly. UNICEF might also not be able to provide, directly or through partner agencies, the additional financing that could be required to ensure equity-focused evaluations. Bamberger and Mabry (2006 and 2012), identify the following strategies for strengthening evaluation designs when working under budget constraints.

Simplify the evaluation design by cutting out one or more of the data collection points; for example, eliminating baseline data for the project or comparison groups, or for both groups. While this can significantly

reduce the costs of data collection, the design is potentially weaker and the threats to validity increase. There are ways to strengthen the design by using secondary data (if available) as a comparison group or baseline data.

Simplify the information to be collected. Often by eliminating non-essential information the length of the survey component can be reduced thereby saving money and time. An important consideration when identifying what information is essential and what can be discarded is to understand what key stakeholders consider to be credible evidence. While some stakeholders only consider findings from large scale sample surveys or statistical impact evaluation designs to be credible, others accept findings from case studies, observation or focus groups.

Understanding different perceptions of credibility can significantly affect the amounts and types of information that it is essential to collect.

More economical ways to collect data. Sometimes it is possible to hire cheaper, but adequately qualified data collectors (for example using nurses or teachers instead of commercial interviewers). Sometimes direct observation can replace the need for sample surveys (for example, observing what means people use to travel to work, instead of conducting a survey). Another option is to use group interviews such as focus groups or participatory rapid appraisal techniques rather than individual interviews. Modern data collection and

analysis technology such as inputting data through mobile phones, hand-held computers, global positioning system mapping and internet surveys, can all reduce data costs.

Cost of data collection can be shared with other agencies or outsourced. For example, another agency may be willing to include a few additional questions in a planned survey; another agency has the capacity and is ready to commission the study; a special module could be administered to a sub-sample of households covered by another study; or the sampling frame could be used to identify households with certain characteristics (such as inequity criteria) to be interviewed in the equity survey.

Many of these strategies can also be used to address time constraints (for example, reducing the amount of data to be collected will also reduce time). Other ways to reduce time can be to increase

the size of the data collection and analysis team or to recruit more experienced (but more expensive) researchers. Videoconferencing is another important way to save time and money, particularly during the planning and analysis stages.

Conclusion

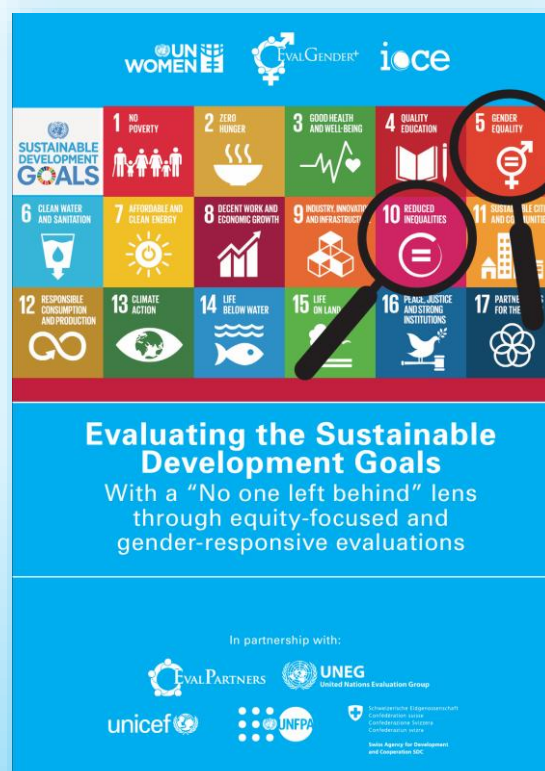
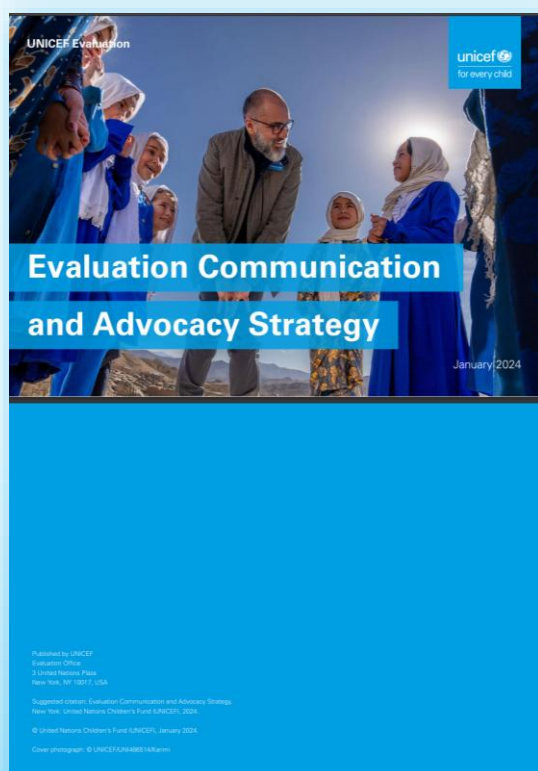
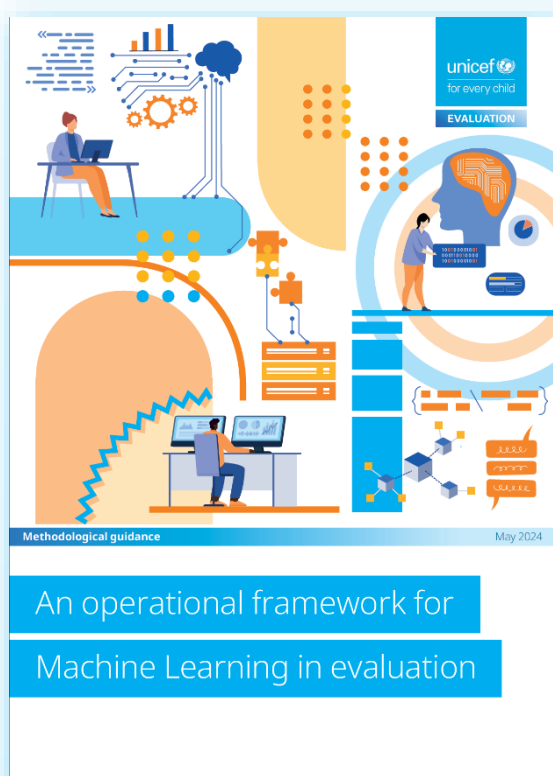
Equity-focused evaluations are crucial for understanding the experiences of hard-to-reach populations. By addressing barriers, employing inclusive methodologies and adhering to ethical principles, evaluators can generate actionable insights to inform policies and interventions. Digitalization, when responsibly applied, offers significant potential to enhance these evaluations.

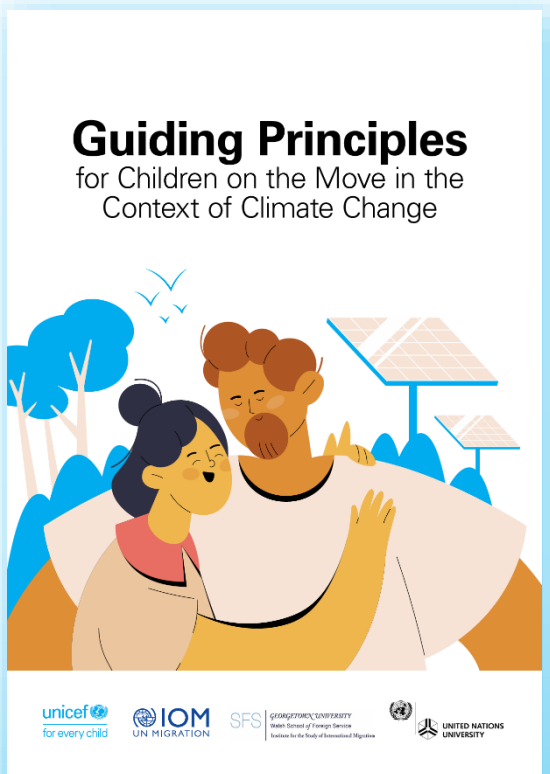
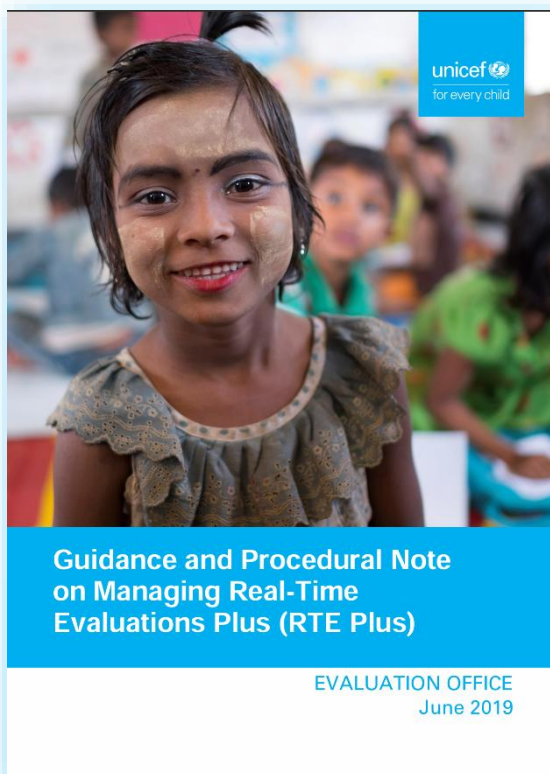
unicef  | for every child

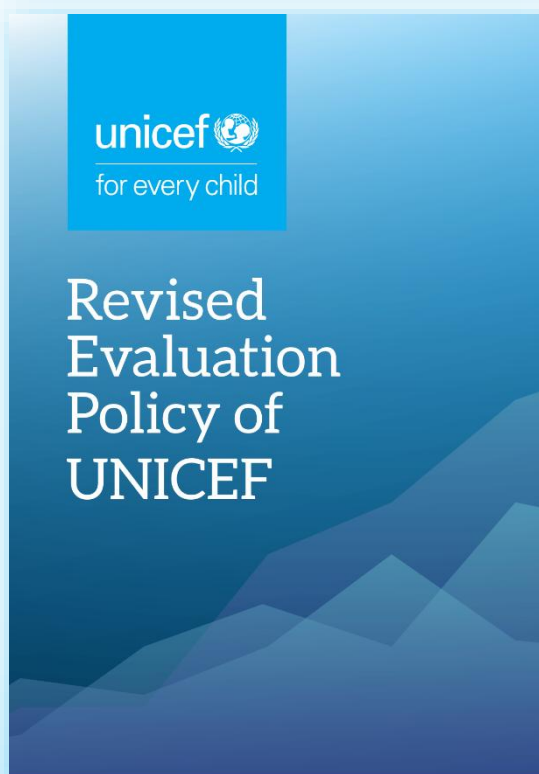
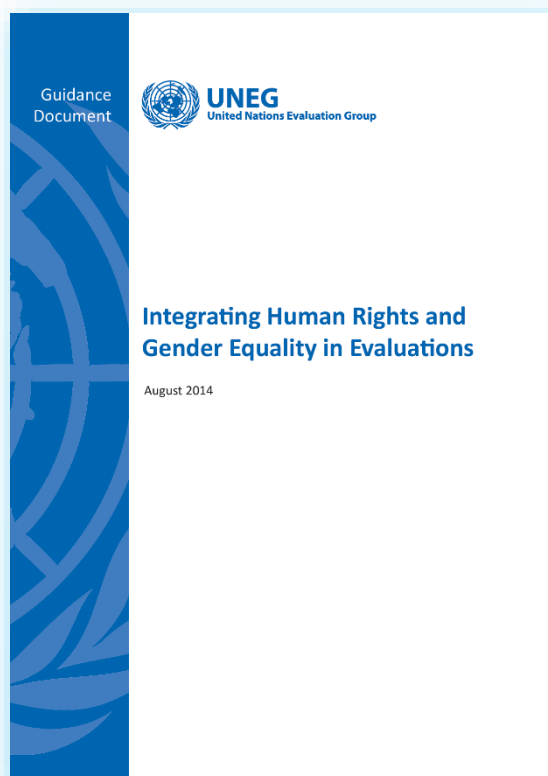
for every child, **every right**
for every child, **ethical rigor**
for every child, **secure protocols**
for every child, **risk mitigation**
for every child, **adaptive methods**
for every child, **diplomatic engagement**
for every child, **inclusive data**
for every child, **safe participation**
for every child, **transparent findings**

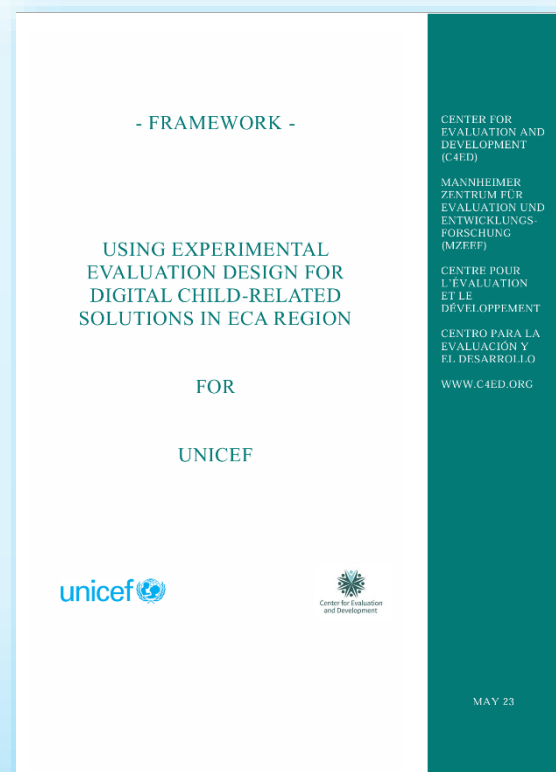
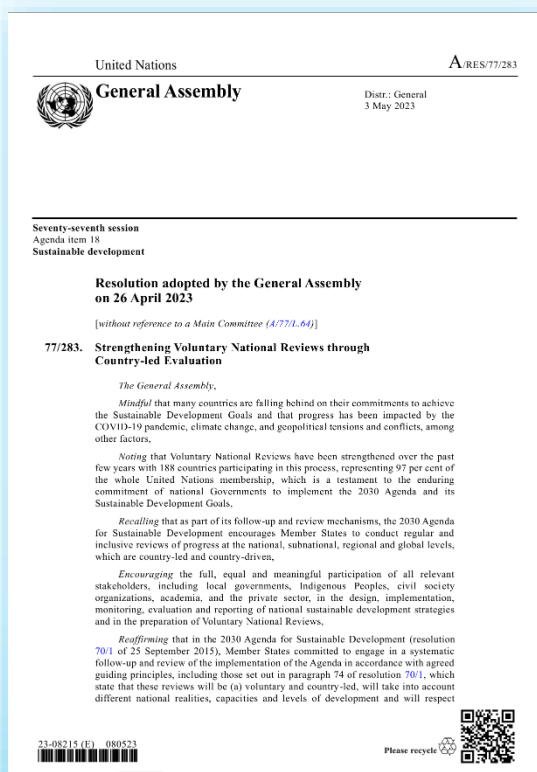
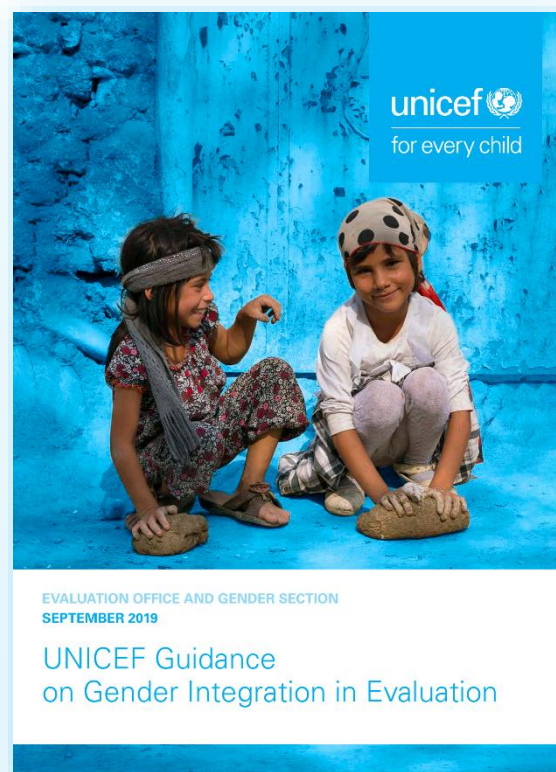
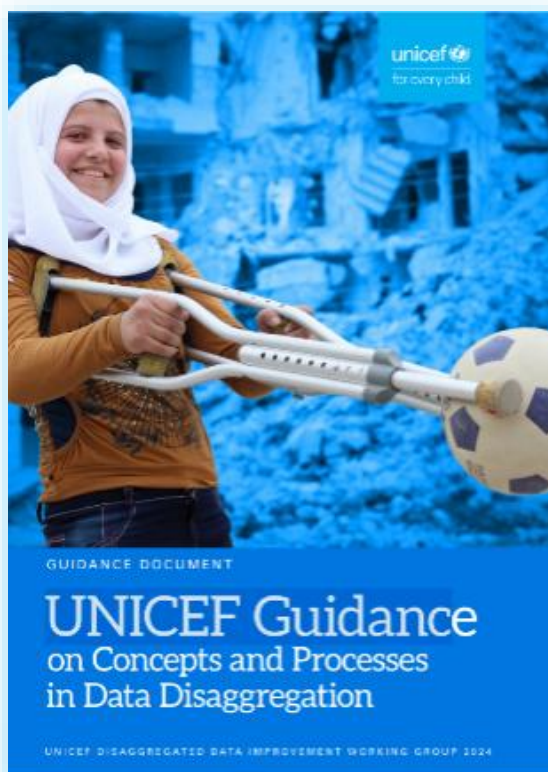
Guiding documents and approaches

UNICEF and partners have developed a number of guiding documents to support evaluators and specialists to apply equity-based evaluations and include all hard-to-reach populations. This Technical Note should be read with consideration of the following documents:









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Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO)
Evaluation Section
Almaty, Kazakhstan

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