STRENGTHENING CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS: Evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance
Strengthening Child Protection Systems: Evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of an evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance in child protection systems strengthening (CPSS) across country, regional and global levels. Child protection (CP) – based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child as “preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children” – is central to the UNICEF mandate.

Historically, UNICEF and others working in this field targeted their efforts mainly at specific issues, or specific populations considered especially vulnerable. Over the past decade, however, the need for more sustainable outcomes has produced a gradual shift toward a more holistic, comprehensive approach. As such, CPSS has been a strategic objective of UNICEF CP work since the adoption of its Child Protection Strategy in 2008.

Overall, the evaluation revealed the importance of conceptualizing systems strengthening as a process that is differentiated by context: In settings where the CP system remains relatively weak or nascent, support for ‘system-building’ is necessary, with ‘system consolidation’ and ‘system reform’ more appropriate in settings where the existing CP system is more developed. Defining the phases along this continuum, and the UNICEF niche and package of interventions in each phase, will be key steps going forward. In this regard, the evaluation has helped to identify which investments are most effective as standalone interventions (capacity-building/workforce strengthening) and as part of a package of interventions in more advanced settings (leveraging public resources, evidence and research and policy advocacy). Finally, the evaluation also identified an opportunity for UNICEF to articulate children’s civil rights as part of CPSS, including the roles children can play in their own protection.
This section lays out the rationale for conducting this evaluation and summarizes what was evaluated. It provides background information on the UNICEF approach to child protection systems strengthening, including the six key elements of functioning child protection systems and the investments UNICEF is making to strengthen these.
In 2008, UNICEF adopted a systems approach to child protection (CP). Broader in scope and ambition than traditional ‘issue-based’ approaches (such as, for example, efforts targeting child soldiers or addressing female genital mutilation/cutting), a systems approach seeks to ensure that children are being protected in a holistic manner fully consistent with their rights. Systems strengthening, in turn, involves enhancing the enabling environment, capacities of institutions and service delivery systems to achieve this aim. Key to this paradigm shift within UNICEF was an emphasis on engaging the full range of actors involved in protecting children, as well as a recognition that child protection mechanisms exist in different degrees of formality.

A decade later, the organization is taking stock of what has been achieved under the rubric of child protection systems strengthening (CPSS), with a view to improving future efforts. The evaluation presented here was an impartial yet collaborative process involving many stakeholders at different levels of UNICEF and beyond, and represents a collective reflection about what UNICEF has learned and where it is headed as an organization with regard to strengthening child protection systems.

The CP systems approach reflects an understanding that several components essential for achieving better results work together across various sectors and tiers, forming a system of mutually reinforcing parts. Achieving comprehensive and sustained results for children in this area requires strengthening the whole CP system – its individual parts, the relationships among them and their operation overall.

The UNICEF definition¹ of CP systems is as follows:
“Certain formal and informal structures, functions and capacities that have been assembled to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. A child protection system is generally agreed to be comprised of the following components: human resources, finance, laws and policies, governance, monitoring and data collection as well as protection and response services and care management. It also includes different actors – children, families, communities,
those working at sub-national or national level and those working internationally. Most important are the relationships and interactions between and among these components and these actors within the system. It is the outcomes of these interactions that comprise the system.”

UNICEF definitions, policies and strategic plans acknowledge that CP systems tend to be multi-sectoral, cutting across parts of the social welfare, education, health, justice, social protection and security sectors. It is understood that these systems must be strengthened through an integrated approach.

UNICEF has monitored its contributions to CPSS since 2012, when the results framework for the updated Medium-Term Strategic Plan (MTSP, 2006-2013) was devised. CPSS has been embedded in subsequent strategic plans, albeit in differing ways. The Strategic Plan, 2014-2017 narrowly pitched systems strengthening as capacity development and advocacy work. In the current Strategic Plan, 2018-2021, meanwhile, CPSS is focused on service delivery and clearly linked to violence against children: “Countries have strengthened child protection systems for prevention and response services to address violence against children (VAC).”

In the absence of a theory of change or results framework specifically for CPSS, and drawing upon the 2015 UNICEF Child Protection Resource Pack, the Evaluation Advisory Group convened for the purposes of preparing and accompanying the evaluation identified six crucial elements that need to be in place for child protection systems to be deemed fully functional. The scope of the evaluation was designed around these elements. They are presented in figure 1 as “intermediate outcomes” (following results-based management logic). It is important to bear in mind that these intermediate outcomes were developed for the purposes of the evaluation and are not currently part of any formal UNICEF plan or results framework.

The evaluation was a participatory and learning-focused exercise: The conceptual framework (figure 1) was co-created by the Evaluation Advisory Group and the Evaluation Office and can be turned into a theory of change for child protection systems strengthening going forward.
The evaluation focused on analysing the UNICEF contribution to achieving the six key elements or “intermediate outcomes” at national level. It did not assess impact at the level of the child. The first three elements are core components of the system and the latter three are key requirements to their functioning:

1. A robust legal and regulatory framework, as well as specific policies related to child protection. This includes regulations and standards compliant with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international standards and good practices.

2. Effective governance structures, including coordination across government departments, between levels of decentralization and between formal and informal actors. Mechanisms must be in place to actualize the relationships between system components and actors, which may include those within the child protection sector and in different sectors at the same level or different levels working together to protect children. Equally important is to ensure that timely and adequate resources are available for the system actors to respond.

3. A continuum of services (spanning prevention and response). A well-functioning system must have preventive, early intervention and response services (including integration with justice/legal sector, education, health, welfare) involving formal and informal sectors, including a process of care which includes identification, referral, follow-up, response, etc.

4. Minimum standards and oversight (information, monitoring and accountability mechanisms). A child protection system must be accountable. Policy development, advocacy work and programming should be evidence-based. This includes information systems that support case management, performance monitoring and scale-up.

5. Human, financial and infrastructure resources. Effective resource management must be in place, such as skilled workers in the right places, adequate budget allocations, effective training and appropriate infrastructure (from vehicles to meeting rooms).

6. Social participation, including respect for children’s own views, and an aware and supportive public. Communities, families and peers play crucial roles in promoting protective social practices and children’s empowerment. Access to civic education and to mechanisms that give adolescents a voice in decision-making make them more resilient to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.
FIGURE 1: Proposed conceptual framework for child protection systems strengthening

**Scope of the evaluation**

**UNICEF core investments**
- Policy dialogue and advocacy
- Evidence and research
- Capacity-building
- Workforce strengthening
- Coordination and partnerships
- Case management
- Financial support for services and infrastructure
- Leveraging public resources
- Service delivery
- Minimum standards and quality control mechanisms
- Children’s participation
- Community-based protection

**Intermediate outcomes**
- Regulatory framework
- Continuum of services
- Governance structures
- Minimum standards and oversight
- Resources
- Social participation

**Outcome**
Countries have strengthened child protection systems (for prevention and response services to address violence against children)

**Impact**
Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

**Assumptions**
- Organizational leadership and support
- Conceptual clarity around “child protection systems strengthening”
- Sustainable and predictable funding for CPSS
- Contribution of other (national and international) actors
- Coverage (geographical)
- Reach (vulnerable populations)

**Enablers**

**Context indicators:** better governance; higher human development; higher per capita income
This section summarizes the questions the evaluation set out to answer as well as how it was carried out - i.e. what tools were used, and where, to collect what kinds of data.
This evaluation is the first comprehensive attempt to gather and analyse evidence about the application of CPSS across UNICEF. It has two overall purposes: 1) to contribute to learning and decision-making with a view to improving UNICEF programming, and 2) to support accountability on CPSS. It assesses the organization’s global strategies and country-level programme performance to strengthen CP systems in order to bring about better protection for girls and boys. It examines CPSS from prevention through response and follow-up, involving formal and less formal actors, covering national and sub-national levels in middle-income, low-income and fragile countries. While the evaluation traces the organization’s CPSS work over the past decade, the main time period under review is 2012 to 2018.

The evaluation was guided by ten evaluation questions in combination with four of the standard evaluation criteria of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD-DAC), namely: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. While some evaluation questions specifically targeted one level – global, regional, or country – others related to more than one tier but generated differentiated evidence and findings for each.

Evaluation questions

At the global and regional levels, the evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. How effective is UNICEF in global leadership and leveraging of partnerships that strengthen CP systems?

2. How appropriate, adequate and coherent are UNICEF global strategies, planned results and guidance documents for strengthening CP systems?

3. How effective is UNICEF regional leadership, guidance/support and leveraging role in helping to strengthen CP systems at the national level?

4. How adequately has UNICEF contributed to:
   • Global efforts in generating and sharing relevant research knowledge/evidence;
   • Data collection and analysis of CPSS; and
   • Monitoring and evaluation of the processes and results achieved by child protection systems?
At the institutional level, the evaluation asked:

5. How effectively and efficiently has UNICEF allocated and managed human and financial resources for addressing child protection through a systems approach?

Country-level questions included in the following:

6. How relevant and appropriate are UNICEF country programme strategies and interventions related to strengthening CP systems for securing the right of children to be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse?

7. How successful has UNICEF been in initiating, supporting and advocating for systems reform? Where/how have funds been allocated? To what extent has UNICEF been able to take a leadership role in generating partnerships and in leveraging national government and partner resources?

8. How effective are UNICEF country programmes, in terms of prevention and response, in achieving concrete results for protecting children (outcomes) through strengthened CP systems? Which combinations of UNICEF investments have contributed to success in systems strengthening within a set of 24 countries?

9. To what extent has UNICEF integrated sustainability considerations (technical, financial, institutional) in child protection systems-related programme design and implementation phases? These would include such aspects as replication, scaling up and mainstreaming.

Finally, with regard to participation, equity and gender equality, the evaluation asked:

10. To what extent do national programmes supported by UNICEF and related to CPSS: a) engage with boys and girls of different ages, especially those considered particularly vulnerable, marginalized and from minority groups and b) take into account and respond to their specific protection-related needs?

Case studies of a purposive sample of 24 countries enabled the evaluation to bring detailed evidence from the country level to bear on the question of UNICEF performance in implementing CPSS, and to generate evidence to inform regional and global efforts in the future. The cases were divided among three levels of depth: Twelve were examined through documentary desk study, six drew additionally on remote interviews with key informants (UNICEF and partners), and six in-depth case studies also drew on data collected during field missions through face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions with adolescents and field observation. Two regional office (RO) visits were combined with the country missions to collect additional regional-level data. Key informant interviews at global level, a document review and two online surveys – one with UNICEF country office (CO) teams, one with government and civil society partners – completed the data sources. Finally, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) was used to examine which combinations of UNICEF investments most successfully contributed to CP systems strengthening within the set of 24 countries.
Strengthening Child Protection Systems
Evaluation Summary

Case Study Countries

6 Case studies
12 Desk studies
6 Desk studies with remote interviews
2 RO visits

Evaluation Methodology

- Mixed methods
- Participatory
- Evaluation Framework & Evaluation Matrix
- Triangulation of findings

6 Case Studies + 18 Desk Studies
Qualitative Comparative Analysis
Stakeholder interviews
Review of documents
Web survey (UNICEF and partners)
This section discusses how well UNICEF performed in supporting countries to strengthen their child protection systems. It also assesses the UNICEF contribution at the institutional, regional and global levels.
The evaluation generated a total of 42 findings pertaining to the country level as well as to the institutional, regional and global levels. A selection of these findings is presented here.

A. Country-level findings

Relevance and appropriateness of UNICEF interventions in CPSS

Overall, the evaluation found that CPSS approaches utilize many of the comparative advantages of UNICEF as an intergovernmental organization with a focus on human rights. The approaches taken by the 24 country offices examined were strongly aligned with the UNICEF mandate, relevant human rights instruments and global priorities. COs have gone to great lengths to ensure alignment of CPSS efforts to country needs, in particular for legal and regulatory reform. Investments in evidence generation on child protection, e.g. mapping and assessment exercises, were highly valued by national partners. However, this emphasis on formal CP systems may limit the extent to which CPSS addresses the needs of the most vulnerable rights-holders.

The success of CPSS work often depends on the ability of UNICEF to mobilize donors and implementing agencies to support a common child protection agenda, yet the evaluation found few examples of broad-based alliances around CPSS. A major factor undermining the relevance of CPSS work is the tendency for donors and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) they fund to circumvent government-led CP systems by creating single-issue, parallel CP service delivery channels. Cases from the evaluation that stand out as exceptions in this regard are Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Romania. In Zimbabwe, UNICEF built on long-standing partnerships around children affected by HIV/AIDS to strengthen the national child protection system. Investments focused not only on core child protection services, but also included large-scale support for social protection transfers. In Nigeria, UNICEF also built on existing partnerships with donors and government and used a series of mapping and assessments at state level to mobilize support for greater investments in child protection systems. Romania is one of several countries in Eastern Europe where UNICEF has supported a care reform agenda over many years. With strong support from the European Union (EU) and from the UNICEF RO in Geneva, the Romania CO has successfully leveraged care reform and juvenile justice to push for broader reform of the existing child protection system.

These cases highlight the potential of CPSS when all actors are collaborating around a common vision. However, in many countries, and at global level, UNICEF has been largely unsuccessful in building resource partnerships and in convincing donors to support the CPS approach in a coordinated manner.

Effectiveness of UNICEF programmes, including from a gender/human rights perspective

The evaluation analysed the organization’s achievements against each of the six key elements/intermediate outcomes identified in the conceptual framework developed for the evaluation (figure 1).
**Intermediate Outcome 1:**
A robust legal and regulatory framework, as well as specific policies related to child protection.

Support to bringing national legal and regulatory frameworks in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international good practice, as well as supporting specific policies related to child protection, has been a strong area of UNICEF contribution across all regions. At the same time, external factors were found to hamper UNICEF contributions in this area. Gaps remain with regard to implementation and enforcement, and underlying systemic issues present obstacles in many countries. Decentralized systems, where national legislation and policies are not necessarily binding at regional or state level, pose a particular challenge. UNICEF has not yet invested significantly in documenting how customary law in various countries addresses CP issues, and how harmonization with national and sub-national norms might be achieved.

**Intermediate Outcome 2:**
Effective governance structures, including coordination across government departments, between levels of decentralization and between formal and less formal actors.

Overall, programme performance in terms of supporting the relationships between CP system components and actors has been moderate: In many of the sample countries, achievements in legislative and policy reform have not translated into strengthened governance and coordination structures. The health sector in particular was rarely found to be well integrated into CP systems work. The overarching challenge is that child protection systems are inter-sectoral, and responsibilities cut across many different ministries. Hence, CPSS involves both horizontal coordination (between ministries and government functions) and vertical coordination (across tiers from national to local).

In some cases, there is no clear lead ministry on CP; in others, multiple ministries have related or overlapping mandates. By default, UNICEF often finds itself taking the lead on CPSS, which can result in limited national ownership of CP system strategies and targets. Yet UNICEF can play an important role as a convener across different sectors and levels of government, and the evaluation found a number of positive examples of it setting up and supporting national CP coordination structures such as inter-ministerial committees. Another challenge is with regard to vertical coordination – that is, ensuring lines of action and reporting to operationalize national legislation and policy at the sub-national and local levels. In the view of several UNICEF partners and key informants, UNICEF work at the government policy and framework level has tended to leave out the roles of NGOs, communities, families and other less formal actors.
Intermediate Outcome 3:
A continuum of services spanning prevention and response.

The evaluation found that UNICEF has made solid contributions in most countries to establishing or strengthening prevention and response services. In addition, there is good attention to not only achieving results for children, but also achieving them in a human rights-, gender- and equity-responsive fashion. However, these contributions rarely add up to functioning service delivery systems. A well-functioning CP system must incorporate a continuum of preventive, early intervention, and response services, including a process of care that includes identification, referral, follow-up and response. A major bottleneck confirmed by the evaluation is the inability of formal systems in most countries reviewed to reach down to community level to provide effective prevention and response services where child rights violations actually occur.

A number of examples were identified of UNICEF contributing to preventive services for child protection, broadly falling into the areas of policy dialogue/advocacy, capacity-building and coordination/partnerships. Overall, however, the evaluation did not find a clear UNICEF approach to prevention within CPSS. There was a tendency to focus on specific government services for children who are deemed ‘at risk’ (secondary prevention only). With regard to response, UNICEF support has led to improvements in services (delivery structures and capacities) as part of CP systems. Key examples include support for alternative care arrangements, improved processes (standard operating procedures, referral mechanisms), including at the community level, and capacity development for CP professionals and community-based leaders. The evaluation also demonstrated that leveraging public financial resources was a stronger contribution than direct financial support and should remain the method of choice. In countries with less developed CP systems, however, direct financial support for services was sometimes effective.

Intermediate Outcome 4:
Minimum standards and oversight (information, monitoring and accountability mechanisms).

UNICEF has helped to introduce a range of data-collection and information management systems to track enforcement of standards and handling of individual CP cases. However, the extent to which specific countries use this information to enhance governmental oversight for child protection varies, and overall tends to be low.

Over the period under review, COs have supported a range of successful initiatives to support governments in establishing accountability and oversight systems for child protection. These included support for the creation of independent structures...
or mechanisms (national ombudspersons and human rights/child rights tribunals) as well as support to government-run supervision and quality control mechanisms for child protection systems (inspection units, management information systems, quality assurance systems). Key informant interviews and the UNICEF and partner surveys confirmed that UNICEF investments in the area of quality assurance and oversight were highly appreciated. Information management systems in particular have generated valuable information and led to common understandings of roles and responsibilities for system actors as well as enhanced opportunities for accountability.

**Intermediate Outcome 5:**

*Human, financial and infrastructure resources.*

With regard to human resources, the evaluation found that many COs have been effective in supporting or implementing training programmes, both for the social service workforce and across sectors (police, magistrates, educators), to increase focus on their roles within the CP system. Many COs now recognize that, given high levels of staff turnover in relevant sectors, the most sustainable approach may be to imbed training on CP systems, roles and responsibilities within professional training curricula linked to each sector (police academies, job description development for the ministries of justice/interior, etc.). This has been achieved to varying extents in Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Sudan, South Africa, Cote d’Ivoire, and Thailand. In addition, there are positive examples of support for community-based CP mechanisms. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in the absence of functioning government services, a ‘protective communities’ approach has emerged to address CP in areas where UNICEF and key partners can operate. In Zimbabwe, a cadre of community care workers trained in CP are linked to the state system through district social workers.

With regard to financial resources, there has been limited success to date in UNICEF programming to support government budgeting for CPSS. Insufficient capacity at CO level is one factor explaining this finding. Identifying fiscal space and ensuring existing allocations within the national budget are well utilized requires specific skills and leadership on the part of UNICEF in order to understand and influence public financing processes in favour of CP systems.

As shown in figure 2, while UNICEF CO staff feel they are effective in influencing national governments to engage in the CP systems approach, they report less success in catalysing financial contributions to CP systems. The lack of consistent funding commitments by governments and donors jeopardizes progress towards functional CP systems and effective protection for children.
How effective is UNICEF in influencing the national government to enhance its engagement and financial contribution to CPSS?

FIGURE 2: UNICEF staff perceive that they are largely effective in engaging government on CPSS but this is not yet matched by financial contributions

Intermediate Outcome 6:
Social participation, including respect for children’s own views, and an aware and supportive public.

‘Social participation’ is an umbrella term created for the purposes of the evaluation, which includes children’s right to be heard and express their own views as well as the existence of institutions and communities that respect these rights and ensure they are being implemented in practice. Overall, the evaluation found that UNICEF has not been systematic in supporting social participation as part of CPSS efforts.

In a number of countries, UNICEF supports community sensitization via schools, CP committees, volunteer CP workers, and other avenues. However, the evaluation encountered few cases in which grassroots engagement practices – of children, communities, families and peers – around CP systems have been documented, and none where a range of social actors, other than NGOs, have been included in the development or design of child protection systems and strategies. Despite children’s participation being a core principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the evaluation found little evidence of governments creating space for child and adolescent engagement in child protection systems, nor of UNICEF advocating for such space. Thus, to date, UNICEF has failed to articulate the role children should play in their own protection, as well as the ways in which girls and boys, communities and families should be included in CP systems.
Summary of 6 Intermediate Outcomes

Overall, across the six intermediate outcomes, UNICEF has been more effective in countries where the context is favourable (e.g. better governance, national ownership and resourcing) and a child protection system is already functioning. That is, UNICEF support to ‘system reform’ has been more successful than contributions to ‘system-building’ or ‘system consolidation’. The major factors influencing the achievement or non-achievement of planned objectives were unrealistic planning, lack of government commitment and funding, poor accountability mechanisms, ineffective donor support and UNICEF lobbying in this regard, poor coordination between statutory and community-based CP systems, and weak data-generation and knowledge management systems.

With regard to equity and gender, many programme documents show adequate attention to gender and the evolving capacities and age of children. Most response services target the most vulnerable boys and girls, while prevention and early intervention services have a wider focus. However, children and adolescents with disabilities continue to be an overlooked population, and gender analysis on population-level data, needs assessments and impact measurement are scarce.

To assess the contribution UNICEF interventions have made to strengthening child protection systems, a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) was conducted which looked at a set of 12 interventions, both in isolation and as part of ‘packages’ that include several activities. Of these, four kinds of investments were found to be particularly effective, and two others also made solid contributions to CP systems strengthening.

The evaluation used an innovative technique to add rigour and depth to its findings: A qualitative comparative analysis of monitoring and context data from 24 country cases was carried out by a team of experts, supported by UNICEF child protection regional advisers. This analysis was able to isolate the most effective UNICEF interventions
1. Capacity-building/social service workforce strengthening (strongest single intervention)

UNICEF investments in capacity-building were assessed in terms of (a) support for training workshops and materials for child protection system actors; (b) curriculum development for the social service workforce; and (c) strengthening the social welfare workforce (beyond curricula). The analysis showed that investments in capacity-building sharply increase the potential for functional child protection systems compared to situations where UNICEF does not invest in capacity-building. Workforce strengthening (elements b and c above) was also highly influential. In each country where UNICEF engaged in this kind of work, a successful outcome was observed.

2. Leveraging public resources (very effective in combination with other interventions)

This intervention includes UNICEF support for budget and public expenditure analysis, leveraging funds from other UNICEF sections for child protection, leveraging public resources for child protection systems and leveraging resources from multilateral donors (EU, World Bank, etc.). In each country where UNICEF engaged in this kind of work, a successful outcome (functioning national CPS) was observed.

3. Evidence and research (very effective in combination with other interventions)

UNICEF investments in evidence and research were measured via child protection budget and public expenditure analysis and research and evidence in support of CPSS. The QCA suggested that without this type of investment, success in CP systems strengthening is impossible. Most successful packages of interventions included evidence and research as key ingredients.

4. Policy dialogue and advocacy (very effective in combination with other interventions)

UNICEF investments in policy dialogue/advocacy were measured in four ways: (a) policy advocacy and technical support for child protection systems; (b) UNICEF convening power; (c) child protection systems mapping and assessment; and (d) support for child protection systems strategy and plans. Investments in policy dialogue/advocacy were key to several successful ‘packages’ of interventions.

Investments in minimum standards and quality control mechanisms (monitoring and oversight) were also effective. Where UNICEF engaged in this line of work, functional CPS were observed in more than four out of every five country cases. Investments in case management and coordination (support for case management systems, CP information management systems and other administrative data systems, support for inter-departmental coordination, etc.) were similarly effective.

For highly-functioning systems, a package of interventions including evidence and research, leveraging public resources and policy advocacy was found to have the greatest impact.
Sustainability of UNICEF interventions in CPSS

The role of UNICEF is to support nationally-owned, -funded and -run systems. Promising interventions identified by the evaluation include support to case management and coordination, which can be sustainable if institutionalized (nationally-owned). However, the lack of financial commitment by national governments, coupled with weaknesses in UNICEF planning, undermines the sustainability of results achieved.

Efficiency of UNICEF human and financial resources for CPSS

Many stakeholders consulted by the evaluation considered that UNICEF manages its CPSS resources efficiently. COs implement many activities to strengthen CP systems with minimal human and financial resources, which can be considered a sign of efficiency. However, data on this aspect were limited, since UNICEF financial and results reporting systems are not yet adequate to support effective monitoring and reporting on CPSS.

B. Institutional, global and regional findings

Institutional effectiveness: policies, strategies, monitoring and evaluation

The evaluation found that UNICEF global strategies and planned results do not adequately capture the latest developments in CPSS. UNICEF has yet to endorse and communicate a clear conceptual framework with regard to child protection systems strengthening. As a result, the organization lacks a shared understanding of the concept, and limited guidance is available to staff, partners and other stakeholders on how to implement it. Moreover, the Child Protection Strategy is outdated and does not reflect current thinking about CPSS.
With regard to knowledge generation, there is a general sense that UNICEF has adequately contributed to data collection on CPSS. However, weaknesses in knowledge-sharing, analysis/synthesis, and in monitoring and evaluation limit the organization’s influence in this sphere. Importantly, the indicators used agency-wide to identify progress toward more robust, sustainable and effective child protection systems remain weak, particularly in terms of their capacity to capture the effects of the UNICEF contribution.

**Global leadership, advocacy and partnerships**

There are good examples of strong CPSS partnerships developed through UNICEF initiatives at the national level. However, the available evidence suggests that UNICEF has not been effective in sustaining its global leadership role and in leveraging key partnerships to ensure continuous strengthening of CP systems. This is particularly notable with regard to donors: As noted above, UNICEF has been largely unsuccessful in building resource partnerships for CPSS. Donor practices of earmarking grants to CP ‘issues’ have further disincentivized a greater focus on systems strengthening.

**Regional leadership, leveraging and support**

The evaluation found that UNICEF ROs have made important contributions to CPSS work, including by documenting challenges faced by countries in their regions and, to a certain extent, by guiding stakeholders in adapting the CPSS approach to regional realities. Stakeholders identified a number of areas where additional RO support would be valued, including more practical guidance on what needs to be done to strengthen CP systems in different contexts and what results can reasonably be expected.

Many programmes show adequate attention to gender and the evolving capacities and age of children. Most response services target the most vulnerable boys and girls while prevention and early intervention services have a wider focus. Children living with disabilities are sometimes overlooked.
This section presents ten overarching lessons from the evaluation and spells out their implications for UNICEF.
Staff lack technical support on operationalizing the systems-strengthening approach in different programming contexts and against the backdrop of large issue-based initiatives and VAC as the new unifying umbrella concept.

Despite the challenges noted in Conclusions 1 and 2, UNICEF has had considerable success in advancing the child protection systems agenda at the national level and in raising awareness among national partners (with variation across countries and regions). However, by and large, this has not translated into adequate domestic investments in CPSS.

Donors have played a largely negative role in advancing national CP systems by distributing funding on a narrow issue-by-issue basis and using parallel monitoring and reporting systems. The organization has so far failed to present key donors with a compelling ‘business case’ for child protection systems strengthening.

UNICEF programme performance on CPSS has been moderate overall. Progress was uneven, with stark gaps in low-income, fragile and humanitarian contexts.
Ten conclusions were drawn from the evaluation evidence. They span conceptual, strategic and operational aspects of UNICEF work to strengthen national child protection systems.

6. The evaluation has identified a number of interventions that are particularly effective for strengthening CP systems, including capacity-building/social service workforce strengthening, leveraging public resources, evidence and research and policy advocacy. This provides some clarity on priority investments for UNICEF.

7. The agency's ambitions for what a child protection system can be expected to accomplish in specific contexts, and in what timeframe, have not been realistic.

8. UNICEF has a clear niche focusing on state accountabilities for children's rights and partnering with government departments at national, provincial and district levels. The organization has yet to define its role with regard to children's participation, community-based child protection mechanisms and the interconnectedness between formal and less formal actors.

9. Investments into staff capacities and learning for CPSS have been insufficient.

10. UNICEF corporate reporting systems on expenditures and results are inadequate to demonstrate the exact level of the organization's contribution to CPSS. This limits their utility, including for accountability and resource mobilization purposes.
Conclusion 1

After a decade of work in this area, conceptual clarity on child protection systems strengthening in UNICEF is still incomplete. As a result, there is a lack of shared understanding around CPSS among UNICEF staff at various levels, and with partners.

The initial theoretical work on CP systems done ten years ago by UNICEF and others provided some degree of clarity on what CP systems are and how they operate. This work has informed corporate strategies and plans since, and, even though highly abstract and theoretical, remains valid in principle. Yet this conceptual groundwork is unfinished business in at least three regards. At the most basic level, there is no official UNICEF definition of child protection systems strengthening that is positioned as such, published and widely shared across all levels of the organization. Second, a clear conceptual framework or programme-impact pathway with associated measurements is missing. Such a framework would lay out the elements that constitute a functioning national CP system on the outcome side and spell out how UNICEF is expected to contribute on the activity side. Finally, the role of community-based child protection and the participation of boys and girls and communities in CPSS remains nebulous.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the evaluation encountered a significant degree of confusion among UNICEF staff and partners around the positioning of the CPSS approach. Is CPSS a programme area? A cross-cutting approach? The umbrella for everything UNICEF does in child protection? Country level staff either (a) repeated the mantra that within UNICEF all CP issues should be addressed through a systems approach to the extent possible and that all levels of the organization should specify how their work advances CP systems, or (b) saw CPSS as one specific programming area alongside others, in line with expenditure coding, results reporting and the narrative of the SP, 2014-2017. Among headquarters (HQ) and RO staff, on the other hand, the CPSS discourse has evolved to focus on specific technical components, including how to choose the best ‘entry point’ and which issues lend themselves more to CPSS than others (which are the best ‘vehicles’ for CPSS) in an issue-dominated landscape. This shift has not been communicated across the organization.

Conclusion 2

Staff lack technical support on operationalizing the systems-strengthening approach in different programming contexts and against the backdrop of large issue-based initiatives and VAC as the new unifying umbrella concept.

In recent years, UNICEF has engaged in a number of large issue-based CP initiatives that are perceived by many to have undermined the systems approach. Systems-related work has focused on specific technical components (social workforce strengthening, CP information systems, etc.) at the expense of a broader and more strategic operationalization of the systems-strengthening approach. Across UNICEF levels and functions, the evaluation witnessed unresolved tensions between producing rapid, quantifiable and measurable
outcomes for children and providing long-term support for strengthening sustainable systems. The desired balance and connection between issue-based and systems approaches to child protection in UNICEF has not been spelled out.

A related operational challenge is the relationship between the systems approach and work to address violence against children, which has been positioned as the unifying umbrella concept in SP Goal Area 3, as per Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.2. While there is a vibrant global VAC agenda and platform, the CPS agenda seems fragmented and disconnected. UNICEF has not yet specified how CPSS work is supposed to be integrated into VAC initiatives as a ‘preferred vehicle’, even if the idea has been floated.

More generally, there is little clarity or systematic evidence on how to choose the best entry point or which issues lend themselves more to CPSS than others. Many past success stories seem to have depended on context, opportunities and the expertise and creativity of individual child protection staff, rather than on a clear and operational corporate approach to child protection systems strengthening.

Finally, the UNICEF programmatic approach to CPSS has so far not distinguished between different levels of functioning and maturity of national CP systems. Rather, UNICEF guidance, exchanges and lesson learning on CPSS have tended to favour the better performing countries with stronger functioning child protection structures. The qualitative comparative analysis of 24 country cases, conducted as part of this evaluation, has shown that requirements for CPSS support range from building child protection systems from scratch to strengthening and scaling up embryonic child protection systems or models to reforming existing child protection systems.

Despite the challenges noted in Conclusions 1 and 2, UNICEF has had considerable success in advancing the child protection systems agenda at the national level and in raising awareness among national partners (with variation across countries and regions). However, by and large, this has not translated into adequate domestic investments in CPSS.

In most countries reviewed as part of this evaluation, the UNICEF role in evidence generation on CP violations, systems mapping and assessments, and costing child protection systems has helped to change the understanding of government partners. Many countries have gradually incorporated a range of policies, procedures and structures required by the CP systems approach, in many cases with UNICEF support. UNICEF technical support has also helped to improve key components of CP systems, including legislation, information management, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and delivery of services to families and children. Many countries now affirm that a systems approach is the only way to tackle pressing child protection challenges and meet international obligations. However, in most cases, this shared understanding has not resulted in resource commitments from governments. In the many of the 24 cases examined, UNICEF CPSS initiatives have not included hands-on work to leverage funds from the Ministry of Finance.
Strengthening Child Protection Systems

Evaluation Summary

Donors have played a largely negative role in advancing national CP systems by distributing funding on a narrow issue-by-issue basis and using parallel monitoring and reporting systems. The organization has so far failed to present key donors with a compelling ‘business case’ for child protection systems strengthening.

With some notable exceptions, donors have had a largely negative influence on the CPSS agenda, since many of them primarily require readily- and quickly-measurable results expressed in terms of numbers of children benefitted. This has led to favouring parallel service-delivery systems that undermine systems strengthening. Donors’ notional interest in strengthening national policies and intersectoral linkages, or raising the number and capacity of staff required to achieve these outcomes, has low priority for funding support. This situation is aggravated by the fact that no comprehensive global platform exists for pooling efforts and resources to strengthen child protection systems. UNICEF staff are therefore challenged to design projects that meet donor expectations for high numbers of early beneficiaries, while also contributing to broad and lasting development results in terms of a robust CP system. In this context, UNICEF has operated in a reactive rather than proactive mode, failing to present key donors with a compelling ‘business case’ for child protection systems strengthening. By neglecting to provide evidence of results achieved and future programming needs, the organization has not yet enabled its partners to judge the CPSS approach on its own merits.

UNICEF programme performance on CPSS has been moderate overall. Progress was uneven, with stark gaps in low-income, fragile and humanitarian contexts.

The evaluation did not include an assessment of impact at the level of the child. It did however demonstrate that in many of the countries examined, UNICEF contributed to a moderate, verifiable level of progress toward strengthening the six dimensions that together make up functioning CP systems. In other words, UNICEF attained some of its objectives at a level that shows some possibility of being sustained or scaled up sufficiently to lead to the outcome. However, since broader supporting factors are usually only weakly present, there is still a long way to go in most of the countries reviewed before comprehensive national child protection systems will be fully operational.

Across the set of 24 countries examined, the UNICEF contribution to CPSS has been particularly strong with regard to strengthening the legal and regulatory framework. UNICEF support was less successful where child protection systems were embryonic and more successful in countries where UNICEF supported the government-led reform of existing child protection systems. Especially in low-income, fragile and humanitarian contexts, child protection systems strengthening has been slow, as UNICEF and other child protection actors continue to support
issue-based approaches. In these settings, COs report spending little or no funds on child protection systems strengthening. Across the board, most countries still lack the institutional capacity, human and financial resources to rapidly address the gaps in existing systems, particularly at the service delivery level.

The evaluation has identified a number of interventions that are particularly effective for strengthening CP systems, including capacity-building/social workforce strengthening, leveraging public resources, evidence and research and policy advocacy. This provides some clarity on priority investments for UNICEF.

Stronger child protection systems benefit most from UNICEF investments in evidence and research, leveraging public resources, and policy advocacy. Successful countries supported at least two of these types of interventions. Investments in capacity-building (including workforce strengthening) made the biggest difference across the entire set of 24 countries, suggesting that this intervention is worthwhile in a wide range of contexts. Support for quality control mechanisms, coordination and case management was also important.

In countries that do not have functioning CP systems, or where these systems are functioning to a very limited extent, UNICEF often invests significantly in community-based child protection mechanisms and provides direct financial and technical support for child protection services and infrastructure. While these investments have not yet yielded functioning CP systems, they appear to be more important in the early stages of strengthening child protection systems – especially in low-income and conflict-affected countries. However, this cannot be confirmed conclusively, since UNICEF has not established intermediate outcome targets along the CPSS process.

The agency’s ambitions for what a child protection system can be expected to accomplish in specific contexts, and in what timeframe, have not been realistic.

Some of the organization’s objectives in terms of child protection systems strengthening, which are oriented to the short- and medium-term, appear mismatched to the widely-understood reality that achieving functional child protection systems is a highly ambitious long-term goal. Moreover, at discussed above, CPSS programming is not (yet) differentiated by programming context and phase, i.e. building, consolidating/scaling-up and reforming national child protection systems. This may have led to ‘over-selling’ and ‘under-delivering’ on systems-strengthening efforts in some contexts, which may in turn have undermined partners’ confidence in CPSS.

A related point is that there is little agreement on how far a child protection system should extend. The initial focus in UNICEF has been on response services and mechanisms for children who are separated from their families and/or live in institutions, and girls and boys who have been exploited and/or have been
victims of violence. In the middle-income countries examined as part of this evaluation, child protection systems can claim some results in prevention and early intervention related to child abuse, neglect and maltreatment. However, these are embedded in a network of allied health, education and social protection systems that shoulder the main burden of prevention and early intervention. In low- and lower middle-income countries, where allied systems were found to be weak, much more of the prevention and early intervention work tended to fall on the core child protection system, leaving it overwhelmed.

**Conclusion 8**

UNICEF has a clear niche focusing on state accountabilities for children’s rights and partnering with government departments at national, provincial and district levels. The organization has yet to define its role with regard to children’s participation, community-based child protection mechanisms and the interconnectedness between formal and less formal actors.

As an inter-governmental organization and through its rights-based approach, UNICEF has a distinct comparative advantage in CPSS. It has access to government at all levels and is well placed to advocate for the duty-bearer’s responsibility to protect all girls and boys living on its territory. However, UNICEF has yet to define its niche with regard to community-based child protection mechanisms and the interconnectedness between formal and less formal actors, especially in countries without functioning formal CP systems. In terms of the ideal programme-impact pathway for CPSS, the dichotomy between formal and less formal child protection structures may have been overstated. As the QCA findings showed, in some of the countries with functioning child protection systems, UNICEF also successfully invests in community-based child protection mechanisms. Investing in children’s civil rights (to information, communication, association) and civic engagement in child protection systems may be an area of opportunity with regard to the participation of girls and boys in CPSS – not least with a view to partners and donors who had supported the agency’s early child protection systems-strengthening work and who believe that the agency is concentrating too much on formal statutory systems and on relationships with government.

**Conclusion 9**

Investments into staff capacities and learning for CPSS have been insufficient.

In some countries and regions, experienced UNICEF staff have been able to provide strong strategic leadership to mobilize donors, governments and other implementing agencies to advance the systems agenda in creative ways. However, many countries lack this capacity. The skill set needed for CPSS goes beyond what is typically found in CP staff, and includes public finance, results-based management, research/analytical skills and strategic leadership (convening, persuading and influencing). These competencies do not seem to have been sufficiently considered in hiring, promotion and retention of staff or in learning initiatives.
UNICEF corporate reporting systems on expenditures and results are inadequate to demonstrate the exact level of the organization’s contribution to CPSS. This limits their utility, including for accountability and resource mobilization purposes.

Coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS are yet to be established, both at the level of the intermediate outcomes (elements of the CP system) and at the level of UNICEF expenditures and investments contributing to these outcomes. For the 2014-2017 period in particular, it has been difficult to assess investments, as it is unclear which ones were considered ‘systems strengthening’ at CO level when expenditures were recorded. Evidence from UNICEF corporate results reporting systems, while markedly improved as part of the SP, 2018-2021, remains patchy; there is a scarcity of data across the steps of the CPSS results chain, especially in areas such as coordination and participation. Relevant common indicators gathered globally (through Strategic Monitoring Questions (SMQ) and the Results Assessment Module (RAM)) are limited and the data entered are of variable quality.

While some countries and regions have made efforts to define CPSS indicators, these have rarely found broader application. Moreover, UNICEF has failed to establish milestones or benchmarks for CPSS that would make it possible to measure intermediate systems performance by phase. This further perpetuated the lack of conceptual and operational clarity (“what gets counted, counts”). It also limited the ability of the evaluation (in particular the QCA) to assess the achievements of intermediate targets. All in all, UNICEF lacks the ability to systematically track its contribution to CPSS progress and performance globally, which hinders the organization from demonstrating results and mobilizing resources for CPSS.

Conclusion 10

A lesson learning exercise is ongoing that compares the conclusions and recommendations from this evaluation with those of a related exercise on the UNICEF contribution to health systems strengthening. The purpose is to highlight commonalities and foster inter-sectoral learning.
This section provides recommendations arising from the findings and conclusions of the evaluation. They are meant to strengthen the organization’s work on child protection systems strengthening in the years to come.
Define the organization’s niche in CPSS and invest in the most impactful areas to strengthen child protection systems. UNICEF should unapologetically embrace a focus on state leadership and accountability, for which it is well positioned. UNICEF needs to clearly position itself in terms of topics and fora through which to push the CPSS agenda.

Strengthen staff and partner capacities and learning on CPSS. CPSS requires a skill set beyond what is typically found in CP staff. These competencies need to be fostered within UNICEF and among partners. In addition, UNICEF needs to do more to support learning between countries (and regions) with similar profiles and challenges.

Address the CPSS data and measurement challenges. Part of what is perceived as lack of conceptual clarity on CPSS is linked to the absence of coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS and the scarcity of global-level data and evidence across the steps of the CPSS results chain.

Leverage partnerships and resources for CPSS, UNICEF should urgently step up its efforts to revitalize partnerships and advocacy in favour of CPSS.
Recommendation 1:
Clarify the UNICEF definition of, and role in, child protection systems strengthening, and ensure that this approach is reflected in organizational strategies, policies and plans.

This should include:

a. Refining the draft programme-impact pathway created for this evaluation;
b. Defining the phases of the CPSS process (system-building, system consolidation and system reform, or a similar typology to be determined);
c. Reflecting this clarified narrative on CPSS in any future update of the UNICEF 2008 CP Strategy, setting out accountabilities for CPSS work among the various actors within the organization.

Recommendation 2:
Define the organization’s niche in CPSS and invest in the most impactful areas to strengthen child protection systems. UNICEF should unapologetically embrace a focus on state leadership and accountability, for which it is well positioned. UNICEF needs to clearly position itself in terms of topics and fora through which to push the CPSS agenda.

UNICEF should:

a. Articulate key priority areas of work and possible entry points for CPSS by context in order to guide programming;
b. Develop a menu of interventions in each priority area, with a different package of options tailored to each phase of the CPSS process and targeting different levels (formal/less formal).

Recommendation 3:
Strengthen staff and partner capacities and learning on CPSS. CPSS requires a skill set beyond what is typically found in CP staff. These competencies need to be fostered within UNICEF and among partners. In addition, UNICEF needs to do more to support learning between countries (and regions) with similar profiles and challenges.

UNICEF should:

a. At HQ level, invest in learning and skills development for staff and partners;
b. At RO level, step up technical assistance for CPSS;
c. At CO level, embrace CPSS as a learning function and a cross-cutting and management responsibility.
Recommendation 4:
Leverage partnerships and resources for CPSS, UNICEF should urgently step up its efforts to revitalize partnerships and advocacy in favour of CPSS.

This should include:

a. Investments in communication and advocacy, including putting forward business cases across the range of contexts;

b. Developing a partnership and resourcing strategy for CPSS, assisting donors to support systems strengthening;

c. Improving the adequacy, equity, efficiency and effectiveness of public finance for child protection services and systems.

Recommendation 5:
Address the CPSS data and measurement challenges. Part of what is perceived as lack of conceptual clarity on CPSS is linked to the absence of coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS and the scarcity of global-level data and evidence across the steps of the CPSS results chain.

UNICEF should:

a. Invest in coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS;

b. Close evidence gaps along the CPSS programme-impact pathway.

UNICEF is preparing a management response to these recommendations, which can be accessed via the UNICEF website. The management response lays out how the organization will address the recommendations, when concrete response actions will take place and which organizational units are responsible for implementing them.
ENDNOTES

1 This definition has been drawn upon by many international and national bodies working in child protection. However, its distinction between formal and informal structures is not defined in UNICEF or in other documents. As a working definition, the evaluation treated government-based elements as formal and ‘traditional’ community-based and NGO elements as informal or ‘less formal’. Some elements, such as National Committees, may span both structures.


3 For instance, the Strategic Plan, 2018-2021 notes: “In protecting girls and boys from violence, exploitation and harmful practices, a key lesson is the importance of strengthening child protection, social protection, education and health systems in an integrated way”.


5 The “impact” statement represented below is the Goal Area 3 statement from the SP, 2018-2021. The “core investments” include key UNICEF interventions from both the SP, 2014-2017 and the SP, 2018-2021.

6 Regulatory framework, continuum of services, governance structures, minimum standards and oversight, resources, social participation.
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