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Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies

Executive summary**

Summary

In 2018, more than 134 million people across the world needed international humanitarian assistance and protection. The United Nations and partners requested \$25.2 billion to provide assistance to 97.9 million of the most vulnerable people worldwide in 2018.^a

The number of countries with violent conflicts is the highest it has been in the last 30 years. An estimated 535 million children — one in four — live in countries affected by conflict or disaster. As of early 2018, nearly 31 million children have been forcibly displaced by violence and conflict, including 13 million child refugees and more than 17 million inside their own countries.^b

UNICEF has been responding to humanitarian crises since 1946, advocating for the protection of children's rights, meeting the basic needs of children and working to enable all children to reach their full potential.

Since 2005, UNICEF has responded to an average of 300 humanitarian situations in over 90 countries each year. In 2018, conflicts, natural disasters, epidemics and other crises continued to undermine development gains and block the path towards sustainable development.^c To meet the growing demand for assistance in multiple, simultaneous, complex and large-scale emergencies, UNICEF has invested considerable resources in its humanitarian action, from \$600 million in 2006 to approximately \$2.8 billion in 2018.^d UNICEF programmes are delivered

* [E/ICEF/2019/9](#).

** The executive summary of the evaluation report is being circulated in all official languages. The full report is available in English from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website (see annex).

Note: The present document was processed in its entirety by UNICEF.



through a diverse range of partnerships that include Government, civil society, the private sector and other United Nations agencies.

An evaluation of UNICEF coverage and quality in complex humanitarian emergencies was undertaken in 2018; it considered 11 country case studies. The evaluation findings reveal that UNICEF showed organizational courage and tenacity in sustaining its work in complex humanitarian emergencies, despite significant challenges. Across all the country case studies, UNICEF was among the largest and most important providers of humanitarian assistance and protection, and often worked in some of the most challenging areas. UNICEF programme coverage in these environments has been significant, and large populations have benefited greatly from the organization's humanitarian action.

The evaluation highlighted several areas that require improvement to enhance and facilitate the provision of effective assistance and protection in complex humanitarian emergencies. Some of these are noted below:

(a) There is often insufficient evidence for UNICEF to judge key aspects of its humanitarian practice. The organization does not always have the information and analysis required to inform effective humanitarian action and be systematic in monitoring changes in the context over time to ensure the continuing relevance of its assistance;

(b) With only a few exceptions, the evaluation found that when a trade-off between equity and coverage was required, coverage was prioritized. Equity programming often requires additional activities or programme areas, making it less cost-effective to deliver;

(c) At the country-office level, UNICEF often lacks a structured approach to accountability to affected people and a routine way of gauging community satisfaction with the coverage or quality of its programmes. Such understanding of the impact of its programmes is important in complex humanitarian emergencies, as the provision of good-quality and accountable assistance can enhance an organization's ability to sustain safe access;

(d) For UNICEF to maximize its coverage and quality in complex humanitarian emergencies, it needs to promote internal change in its methods of designing and delivering integrated programmes and of disseminating, interpreting and acting upon policies and procedures.

The report draws conclusions and makes recommendations intended to support the organization to reach those in greatest need of assistance and who are least accessible.

Elements of a draft decisions are provided in section VI.

^a United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Global Humanitarian Overview 2018, New York, 2018.

^b UNICEF, "Children under attack", 2018. Available from www.unicef.org/children-under-attack.

^c UNICEF, "Humanitarian action for children 2019". Available from www.unicef.org/appeals.

^d The 2018 appeal was \$3.8 billion. As at 10 December 2018, funding for the appeal had reached \$1.85 billion (49 per cent funded). In addition, UNICEF had approximately \$919 million available from 2017.

I. Background and purpose of the evaluation

1. UNICEF has been responding to humanitarian crises since 1946 and has global responsibility for advocating for the protection of children's rights,¹ meeting the basic needs of children and working to enable all children to reach their full potential. While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child underpins overall UNICEF programming, the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action are the foundation for the UNICEF humanitarian response. UNICEF also has direct responsibility and accountability as the lead agency for the Child Protection Area of Responsibility and the water, sanitation and hygiene and nutrition clusters; and as co-lead, with Save the Children, of the education cluster.²

2. The evaluation covers the period 2015–2018. Its purpose was to generate, through robust and systematic analysis across a range of country contexts, practical solutions to inform the ways in which UNICEF could improve the coverage and quality of its humanitarian response. It is anticipated that both the evaluation process and the results will contribute to a body of evidence and learning regarding the enablers and barriers to delivering high-quality humanitarian action in complex humanitarian emergencies, and the ways in which such barriers have affected UNICEF performance and its ability to reach affected populations.

3. The first phase of the evaluation included three pilot case studies, one field mission (Nigeria) and two desk reviews (Pakistan and Ukraine). The second phase included four more field missions (Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Philippines and Somalia) and four desk reviews (Burundi, Mali, the Syrian Arab Republic and the State of Palestine).

4. The evaluation had three objectives:

(a) To assess UNICEF performance in achieving coverage and quality in complex humanitarian emergencies based on a sample of countries, including identifying internal and external enabling factors and challenges to performance;

(b) To identify internal and external enabling factors and challenges to the fulfilment by UNICEF of its protection mandate and role in complex humanitarian emergencies, including its designated role in the monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict;

(c) To capture good practices and innovations that are improving humanitarian action and analyse their potential for application by UNICEF.

II. Evaluation approach

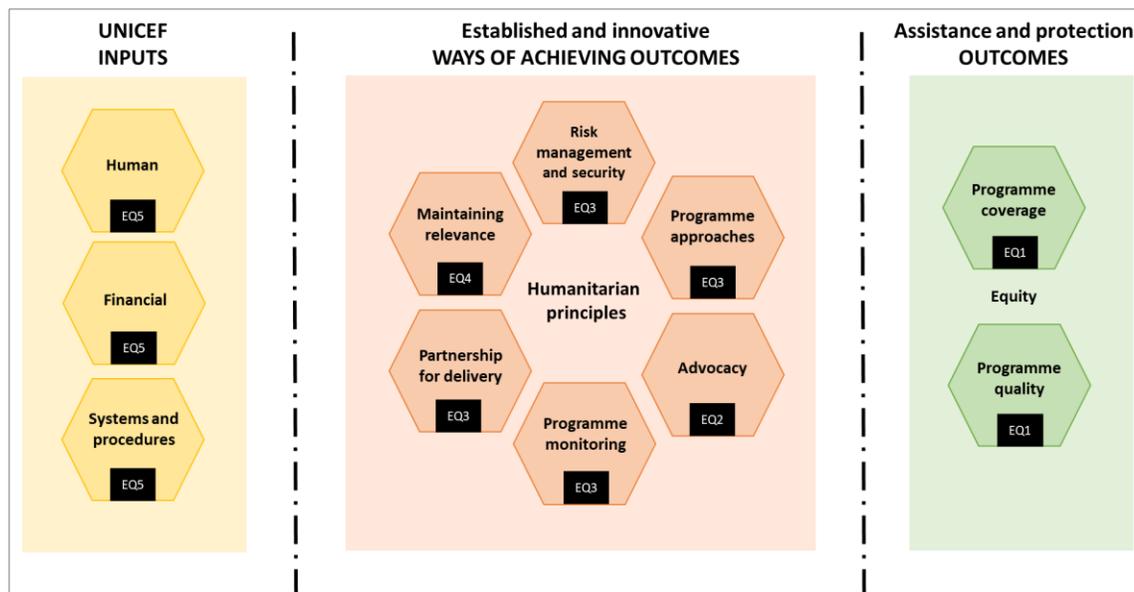
5. Given that the primary focus of the evaluation was on practical solutions rather than theory, an analytical framework was used to articulate the critical building blocks and enablers of coverage and quality in humanitarian response. The framework uses three lenses to examine UNICEF performance. The first comprises the outcomes or results of UNICEF humanitarian action with regard to coverage and quality. The second encompasses the ways of achieving those results and the approaches applied

¹ UNICEF has specific responsibility for the reporting of grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict, through the monitoring and reporting mechanism.

² Until 2017, UNICEF also co-led the Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility with the United Nations Population Fund.

across a range of field contexts and at the global level to support UNICEF operations in complex humanitarian emergencies. This includes the ways in which UNICEF delivers its programmes, works in partnership and advocates and uses other approaches to strengthen coverage and quality. The third lens involves the inputs that UNICEF provides — human, financial and procedural — that enable or hinder the ways of working.

Figure I
Analytical framework for the evaluation



6. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach for data collection and analysis. Qualitative data were collected through a literature review, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Quantitative programme performance data and funding information were collected and analysed. Key informant interviews were conducted with UNICEF staff, government and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners and United Nations agencies. Focus group discussions were conducted with communities receiving UNICEF-funded assistance.

7. Based on the analytical framework, an evaluation matrix was developed consisting of five headline evaluation questions and 16 evaluation sub-questions, to assist in assessing performance and identifying how good practice and innovations at the field level were contributing to coverage and quality outcomes. The five questions are:

(a) To what extent is UNICEF achieving coverage and quality in its humanitarian action in an equitable way; and what good practices, lessons and practical solutions can be identified to inform improvements across the UNICEF response?

(b) In what ways and how effectively has UNICEF influenced others to increase the quality and coverage of humanitarian action?

(c) What programme approaches and partnership strategies has UNICEF employed at the field level to gain principled access and improve coverage and quality, and with what success?

(d) To what extent is the UNICEF humanitarian response designed to be relevant and is adapted to ensure its ongoing relevance to evolving needs and priorities?

(e) To what extent do UNICEF human and financial resource management and systems and procedures support an effective response in complex humanitarian emergencies?

III. Selected findings

A. UNICEF achievement of coverage and quality in humanitarian action in an equitable way

8. The evaluation found that UNICEF coverage in complex humanitarian emergencies is significant in its reach. Where funding, access and capacity permit, UNICEF uses its cluster lead agency responsibility as provider of last resort as a means of determining its expected coverage. Although UNICEF is inconsistent in how it determines vulnerability, it frequently prioritizes the collection and analysis of sex- and age-disaggregated data that inform its approach to equity. It is less consistent in its analysis of other factors that contribute to vulnerability. Country offices seek to strike a balance between reaching large numbers of more easily accessible affected people with smaller numbers of those who are most in need, but are harder and more expensive to reach, although there is no consistent approach.

9. The evaluation also found that programme quality is routinely guided by the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, which are contextualized to strengthen their relevance, in addition to global quality standards. What is more difficult to determine is the consistency with which UNICEF is meeting these quality standards; such consistency is dependent upon the frequency with which the organization can access locations as well as its funding and capacity. Evidencing the degree to which UNICEF meets the quality standards is dependent upon the strength and reach of its own monitoring, which can be variable. The result is that it is not possible to determine whether UNICEF consistently adopts programme approaches that deliver the most appropriate and best-quality services to affected people.

10. The evaluation determined that the programme approach has an important influence on the delivery of coverage with equity. While programmes that focused on achieving coverage and meeting basic needs, such as one-off distributions or periodic support that require limited agency presence, provided essential assistance to communities in crisis at the outset of a response, there was no common approach or guidance for transitioning from such approaches to a more sustained presence or the delivery of more-comprehensive, long-term assistance. UNICEF does not routinely monitor these shifts, making changes in programming approach difficult to track. The greater the experience and capacity of staff members, the more agile they are likely to be in shifting between different programme approaches to ensure the greatest quality possible in the context.³

³ There are also external determinants, the most significant of which are security, access, partner capacity and funding.

B. UNICEF influence on the quality and coverage of humanitarian action

11. UNICEF is a bold advocate for children affected by armed conflict and often prioritizes its monitoring and reporting mechanism responsibilities, despite the resourcing challenges that these present. UNICEF has achieved notable successes in securing the release of children engaged by armed groups and in subsequently supporting them through its programmes. It has taken a broadly relevant approach to how it has engaged with duty bearers, guided by government sensitivities, partner capacity to collect and report violations and the existence of an integrated United Nations presence.

12. UNICEF has used its role as cluster lead agency to strengthen the coverage and quality of the response of other agencies to complex humanitarian emergencies. The evaluation highlighted good practices from countries in identifying and filling gaps in the humanitarian response, promoting contextualized standards and strengthening the capacity of partners to meet these standards. There are, however, areas for improvement. Findings from recent inter-agency evaluations are consistent with the findings of the present evaluation in raising concern about the veracity of cluster assessment data and coverage figures and the adequacy of cluster monitoring systems.

13. The evaluation found that UNICEF performance in advocating for access has been variable. The organization is well-regarded among United Nations agencies for its advocacy on access, but local, national and international NGO partners are more critical. This may be a reflection, in part, of the different interlocutors with which NGOs and United Nations agencies engage, but there is a common perception among NGOs that UNICEF seeks to strengthen its own access rather than that of its partners. There is scope for UNICEF to champion access, particularly in contexts in which its knowledge of and engagement with humanitarian country teams and Governments place it in a privileged position to prompt change.

C. UNICEF programme approaches at the field level

14. UNICEF uses a broad range of strategies and approaches to provide assistance to affected people in complex humanitarian emergencies. While humanitarian principles are at the core of UNICEF policies and procedures, there is some variability in the levels of understanding and interpretation of staff and partners. UNICEF staff tend to place the principle of humanity above other principles, which is frequently and incorrectly interpreted as achieving humanitarian access and assistance at all costs. However, the more complex principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence are equally important.

15. There is a need to strengthen the capacity of all UNICEF field staff to use the full menu of principles to make structured decisions on access. There is similar scope to strengthen capacities for humanitarian negotiation with State and non-State entities, keeping in mind that negotiations are frequently undertaken by field staff at checkpoints and project sites. The evaluation determined that, above all else, UNICEF must strengthen its engagement with partners on issues of gaining and maintaining principled access.

D. Ongoing relevance of the UNICEF humanitarian response

16. UNICEF uses a range of formal tools and informal networks to maintain its context analysis, although the focus of these is frequently on strategic analysis rather

than operational analysis. The evaluation recognizes that a shift to lighter, operationally focused processes of context analysis is already being promoted through the roll-out of the UNICEF access framework. This framework is more relevant to identifying and exploiting opportunities to improve access and increase coverage. There is also room for improvement in the ways in which UNICEF engages with communities. While a comprehensive framework has been developed, UNICEF staff have found it challenging to deliver in practice.

17. The evaluation found a lack of understanding at the field level as to how to routinely engage with communities to ensure programme relevance and quality and elicit the views of those receiving UNICEF-funded assistance. This is particularly important given the links between the delivery of quality programmes and community acceptance. Developing these links is an important strategy for achieving humanitarian access. The evaluation also underscored that UNICEF must clarify what its partners need to do to fulfil institutional aspirations and moral obligations for accountability to affected populations.

E. Effects of UNICEF inputs on coverage and quality

18. The evaluation found that UNICEF systems and procedures are comprehensive and, where applied, invaluable to staff engaged in humanitarian response. However, the evidence also points to inconsistencies in how the procedures are understood and implemented and where the simplification of procedures is granted; this held for human resources procedures and programme cooperation agreements/programme documents, both of which have the potential to significantly strengthen the speed and quality of the UNICEF response if simplified procedures are used. An area in which there was greater progress was procurement, supply and logistics. The evaluation documented several examples of the ways in which the actions of logistics staff in-country or the Supply Division more broadly had strengthened preparedness or the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance.

IV. Conclusions

19. The evaluation concluded that its main question – to determine the coverage and quality of UNICEF assistance in complex humanitarian emergencies – was important both to UNICEF and its partners and those they seek to assist, but it could not easily be answered with the available data. It found that between 2015 and 2018, UNICEF showed organizational courage and tenacity in sustaining its work in complex humanitarian emergencies, despite significant challenges. While the evaluation showed that humanitarian services have been extended to many of those in greatest need, one of its most important findings is that the data do not permit a detailed and consistent examination of what proportion of needs was met or whether the greatest needs were met.

20. The lack of adequate data collection, disaggregation and reporting means that UNICEF cannot reliably calculate its coverage in relation to need nor accurately determine whether it is targeting those in greatest need. UNICEF as well as the broader humanitarian system lack measures to adequately track coverage due to contextual challenges and time constraints that prevent sophisticated data collection methods. Estimates of people in need lack accuracy and they mostly fail to differentiate between different levels of vulnerability. The imbalance between (a) humanitarian demand; (b) humanitarian supply; (c) donor priorities; and (d)

efficiency measures reinforces an approach that prioritizes coverage over equity and quality.

21. From an institutional perspective, the focus of UNICEF on targets rather than on people in need; variability in the capacity of its staffing; and institutional pressure, including cluster lead agency responsibility, to deliver at scale tend to reinforce this focus.⁴ Practice was varied in terms of how expected funding; capacity; and access constraints were factored into the targets, and there was no established process for readjusting targets based on funding received.

22. While UNICEF routinely uses quality standards to guide its work, the delivery of those standards is affected by a range of internal and external factors that tend to push the organization towards prioritizing the most visible and accessible needs in complex humanitarian emergencies, albeit at a large scale. In complex humanitarian emergencies, coverage and quality are achieved only through access to those in need of assistance and protection, and in such contexts, those most in need are almost always the least accessible and most costly to reach. UNICEF often struggles to reach such places. There are several reasons for this, including external factors that may be difficult to overcome.

23. There are also several internal factors that influence access, which UNICEF can address. These include inconsistencies in the knowledge and understanding of staff regarding humanitarian principles and a limited capacity for humanitarian negotiation and for solving ethical dilemmas and weaknesses in engaging with communities affected by crises. Addressing these capacity gaps, particularly among front-line staff, would provide an important frame of reference and set of competencies for UNICEF to more consistently gain and maintain principled access. UNICEF could also leverage its good reputation and its extensive networks to routinely advocate for principled access.

24. The evaluation also found that the United Nations security management system, which is meant to assist UNICEF to “stay and deliver”, often fails to fulfil its function. One finding was that the working relationship between the Department of Safety and Security and UNICEF was frequently governed by personality and background, which meant that there was no guarantee of success. Therefore, it was important for UNICEF to continue to maintain its own security risk management capacity.

25. External to UNICEF, an integrated United Nations presence and broader engagement with the military or armed groups can influence how UNICEF is perceived, and this can be a significant constraint in conflict contexts.

26. Across the case studies, the impact of the United Nations security management system on UNICEF coverage was extremely variable, and in some contexts was a considerable constraint. In addition, examples of constructive ways of working; innovative approaches to facilitating access; and scope for negotiation for UNICEF to “stay and deliver” that were observed in some countries suggest a lack of consistency in how procedures are interpreted and applied. It is important for blockages to be systematically documented and addressed. Overcoming these challenges will also require ongoing investment from UNICEF in developing

⁴ While the evaluation was being undertaken, UNICEF introduced an initial set of measures that included a revision of the Humanitarian Action for Children process and intensified training and quality assurance to strengthen the clarity of rationale on the relationship between people in need and targets.

adequate internal capacity and, wherever possible, collaborating with other United Nations agencies.

27. The evaluation found that the access of UNICEF partners was of greatest importance, since they are tasked with delivering its humanitarian assistance and protection, and UNICEF could do more to support them in this regard. Given the constraints that UNICEF faces in accessing affected people in volatile environments, its partners are essential in filling the access gap by virtue of the role they play (Government), their proximity to communities (local/national NGOs) or their institutional capacity or mandate (international NGOs).

28. However, the access of partners is still highly context-dependent. There is potential for UNICEF to strengthen partner access (a) through advocacy; (b) by taking a greater interest in how its partners understand and use humanitarian principles; and (c) by engaging more strategically in capacity development. Strengthening operational context analysis will best position UNICEF to identify and exploit access opportunities as they arise as well as improve the understanding of which partners are best placed to gain principled access.

29. The case studies provided some good examples of ways in which UNICEF has expanded coverage that have the potential to be used more broadly. Integrated programming, cash assistance and rapid response mechanisms all have an important influence on coverage or quality, but they also suffer from internal challenges that may restrict their wider use.

30. The evaluation noted that evidence of the contribution that each of these approaches can make to coverage and quality already exists and is known to UNICEF. Risk-informed programming, preparedness and resilience are all areas of growing competence for UNICEF and have the potential to play an important role in strengthening the speed of response and bridging the humanitarian-development divide. UNICEF must ensure, however, that a principled approach to humanitarian action is consistently adopted for all its programming.

31. The evaluation also concluded that UNICEF systems and procedures are consistent with its access aspirations, but there is scope to apply them more widely and adapt them for greater effectiveness. UNICEF internal resources, systems and procedures have an important influence on coverage and quality in complex humanitarian emergencies.

32. The decentralized internal architecture of UNICEF is appropriate for decision-making on access, and regional offices play an important role in providing support and in ensuring that country office strategies are in line with corporate aspirations, according to the evaluation. However, the retention of high-performing teams is a persistent challenge. Establishing national staff teams with the diversity, capacities and networks to facilitate access can also be difficult and is an area that requires particular attention. The quality and quantity of funding are consistent challenges for country offices, although the evidence suggests that UNICEF has had some measure of success in navigating donor conditions. Where it has struggled, there is scope to clarify the conditions under which funding should be refused, with a focus on using a principled lens to drive decision-making.

V. Recommendations

33. The evaluation found that UNICEF has shown courage and tenacity in providing assistance to those affected by complex humanitarian emergencies, often at

significant risk to its staff and partners. Across all the case studies, UNICEF was among the largest and most important providers of humanitarian assistance and protection and often worked in the most challenging areas. However, it can do more to reach those in greatest need of assistance and who are least accessible. There is also scope for UNICEF to ensure that it more routinely has the data, analysis, staff, partners and programme approaches to facilitate the provision of effective assistance and protection in complex humanitarian emergencies.

34. The overarching recommendation of the evaluation is for UNICEF to articulate and implement a strategy for accessing those who are in greatest need of assistance in a timely and principled manner, particularly in contexts with limited funding. This will ideally address the dilemmas associated with meeting its mandate in complex, high-threat environments.

35. The evaluation determined that the response of UNICEF to the overarching recommendation will provide a framework for the implementation of five clusters of recommendations:

- (a) Evidence: the generation and use of evidence to determine coverage and quality;
- (b) Ethics: principled decision-making to strengthen humanitarian access;
- (c) Accountability: improving accountability to promote partnerships and community acceptance;
- (d) Architecture: influencing the external humanitarian architecture;
- (e) Approach: adapting internal approaches and systems to maximize coverage and quality.

A. The generation and use of evidence to determine coverage and quality

36. Delivering quality programmes that address the greatest needs is a challenge in complex humanitarian emergencies, and the evaluation found several areas in which there was insufficient evidence for UNICEF to make a judgement on key aspects of its humanitarian practice. Where possible, UNICEF needs to obtain the information and analysis required to inform effective humanitarian action and must be more systematic in monitoring changes in the context over time to ensure the continuing relevance of its assistance.

37. In terms of assessing and reporting coverage, the evaluation found that the data collected by UNICEF did not permit a detailed examination of what proportion of needs were met or whether the greatest needs were met. As a consequence, UNICEF was unable to determine its reach against the total number of people in need. Moreover, there was a lack of clarity in how UNICEF reported changes in its targeting.

38. UNICEF and the clusters it leads should calculate targets based on an assessment of people in need, according to the evaluation. Changes in targets should be consistently monitored and transparently reported. This will provide the strongest

evidence base for advocating for adequate resources for humanitarian response.⁵ The recommendations are the following:

(a) UNICEF should seek to achieve greater consistency in assessing, monitoring and reporting its humanitarian coverage by routinely measuring coverage as a proportion of the people in need for each of its sectors;

(b) UNICEF should use its role as cluster lead agency to advocate to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee for the consistent measurement of coverage as a proportion of people in need to be adopted across clusters;

(c) To improve evidence of its humanitarian results, UNICEF should strengthen its investments in innovation and technology so that it can more consistently monitor the coverage and quality of its programmes at a disaggregated level. Where progress is made, it should seek to work with its partners and clusters to strengthen practice at the inter-agency level;

(d) Acknowledging that UNICEF targets will change as a consequence of internal and external constraints (e.g., access, capacity, funding, security), UNICEF should be more transparent in documenting and reporting the basis on which initial targets have been calculated and how these change throughout the year.

39. In terms of prioritizing coverage with equity, with only a few exceptions, the evaluation found that when a trade-off between equity and coverage was required, coverage was prioritized. Equity programming often requires additional activities or programme areas, which makes it less cost-effective to deliver. The recommendations are the following:

(a) UNICEF should resolve the dilemma of how to balance coverage and equity in complex humanitarian emergencies, with a view to clarifying its approach;

(b) In their response strategies, country offices should include a vulnerability analysis that draws on the relevant humanitarian needs overview, clearly identifies the people most in need and provides a justification for the targeting of certain groups rather than others;

(c) In Level 3 and humanitarian evaluations, UNICEF should routinely include an examination of coverage with equity to build an evidence base for assessing its performance.

40. With regard to using context analysis to ensure the relevance of programme approaches and partnership choices, the evaluation found few examples of the organization's undertaking light operational context or conflict analysis that could assist in identifying the dynamics that influence access to those in greatest need as well as offer UNICEF the opportunity to exploit changes in the context to access vulnerable communities.

41. UNICEF should undertake regular analysis to adapt programme approaches and partnerships to maximize their relevance and their potential to reach those in greatest need. Underpinning this should be an approach that consistently prioritizes agency presence and ensures the greatest proximity to affected people. The recommendations are the following:

⁵ While the evaluation was being conducted, UNICEF circulated revised guidance on setting humanitarian response target levels that may go some way to meeting the recommendations. See UNICEF, "Brief on Setting Humanitarian Response Target Levels", *Humanitarian Planning and Monitoring Learning Resources*, November 2018.

(a) UNICEF should routinely develop light operational analysis to permit evidence-based planning and programme delivery in complex, high-threat environments. At a minimum, this should include actor mapping; conflict, needs, coverage and gap analyses; and changes in access;⁶

(b) Context analysis should be used as a lens to regularly review programme approaches to ensure their relevance and to critically assess the scope that may exist to adapt or expand programmes to exploit changes in access (coverage), address new or unmet needs (equity) or adapt approaches to strengthen quality;

(c) Context analysis should also be used as a means of regularly reviewing UNICEF partnerships with a view to ensuring that partners are best able to provide principled assistance, maintain the greatest presence and proximity to affected people and have the skills and capacity to deliver programme quality;

(d) Regional offices should monitor and support country offices in this task and trigger periodic strategy reviews and shifts, if required.

B. Ethical and principled decision-making to strengthen humanitarian access

42. In complex humanitarian emergencies, the most immediate ethical dilemmas are those associated with maintaining humanitarian principles and ensuring that they inform the UNICEF approach to access, negotiations and operations more broadly. Linked to this, a second set of dilemmas results from the mandate of UNICEF and requires that in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, UNICEF adopt a principled approach to navigating the ethical fault lines between competing organizational priorities of humanitarian action, poverty reduction and social justice. A third set of dilemmas is linked to UNICEF engagement with its partners and contractors in complex humanitarian emergencies where UNICEF has a moral obligation to ensure the routine use of robust risk management practices.

43. In terms of supporting principled humanitarian decision-making, the evaluation found that the understanding of UNICEF staff of humanitarian principles was variable, and the evidence suggests that principles are not routinely used as a framework for decision-making in volatile environments. In addition, UNICEF tended to prioritize its own access above that of its partners.

44. The evaluation found that there is a need to strengthen the understanding and capacity of all UNICEF staff (at both the headquarters and country-office levels) and partners about the practical use of humanitarian principles to make structured, ethical decisions on programme access, coverage and quality.⁷ The recommendations are the following:

(a) At the country-office level, UNICEF must ensure that its front-line staff understand and can use humanitarian principles to make operational decisions. Any knowledge gaps should be identified and addressed through training;

(b) At the country-office and field-office levels, UNICEF should designate a staff member to serve as an access specialist to provide support and guidance on

⁶ This list is not comprehensive. Guidance on the UNICEF approach will be provided in the forthcoming UNICEF Access Field Manual.

⁷ The forthcoming UNICEF Access Field Manual will include a systematic approach to developing country office access strategies, which may go some way towards addressing the recommendations.

issues of programme access. Staff selection for this role should prioritize an understanding of context, conflict and power dynamics as well as personal networks and integrity;

(c) UNICEF should strengthen its engagement with partners on humanitarian principles and access. Commitments should be routinely referred to in programme documents, training should be provided if required and UNICEF should monitor how its partners and third-party service providers achieve access;

(d) UNICEF and its partners should also more deliberately and consistently communicate the use of principles with communities as a means of strengthening acceptance;

(e) UNICEF should be more consistent in using its humanitarian country team membership and broader networks with Governments to advocate, when required, for principled access for itself and its partners;

(f) At the headquarters level, UNICEF should foster an organizational culture that recognizes, discusses and documents significant ethical dilemmas and decisions to build knowledge, promote transparency and permit consistency in decision-making;

(g) The UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes should produce a short guidance note that outlines the dilemmas inherent in the UNICEF mandate and provide a decision-making framework to assist in prioritizing principled assistance in complex humanitarian emergencies;

(h) Acknowledging that decision-making will be context-specific, it is recommended that a framework to guide principled decision-making on donor conditions be developed by the UNICEF Public Partnerships Division.

45. With regard to strengthening competence in negotiating access, the evaluation found that UNICEF most frequently engaged in humanitarian negotiations at the local level, but that front-line staff frequently lacked specific skills and training. Staff who have been involved in negotiations, particularly those that are unsuccessful, can face increased risks as a consequence.

46. The evaluation found that UNICEF should take a more structured approach to identifying, equipping and supporting staff at the country level who engage in humanitarian negotiations with non-State entities and host Governments. The recommendations are the following:

(a) Disseminate widely among staff working in complex humanitarian situations the UNICEF revised guidance on engaging with non-State entities,⁸ which provides an enhanced framework for decision-making and includes an accountability and decision-making tree;

(b) At the country-office and field-office levels, UNICEF should designate staff members to lead on negotiations; selection for this role should draw on personal knowledge, experience, integrity, networks and profiles. Where appropriate, these responsibilities should be merged into the humanitarian access role;

(c) UNICEF should take a more structured approach to training and supporting staff tasked with negotiating access at both the operational and strategic

⁸ UNICEF, *Engaging with Non-State Entities: A field practitioners' manual* (2011; revision forthcoming).

levels, and should engage with staff in advance of, during and after negotiations to assess risk and to provide support.

47. The evaluation found that if the dual mandate of UNICEF is not managed well, it could lead to challenges in protecting humanitarian principles. This is particularly true in situations in which the Government is party to a conflict, is not meeting its responsibilities under international humanitarian law or is otherwise contradicting humanitarian principles, when at the same time, UNICEF is collaborating with the Government on developmental programming.⁹ The recommendations are the following:

(a) UNICEF should communicate the importance and value of humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law as part of its engagement with the State on systems-strengthening for preparedness and response;

(b) To preserve its adherence to humanitarian principles, UNICEF should pay careful attention to managing its relationship and advocacy with the State in countries in which the State is a party to the conflict;

(c) In cases in which the State makes demands of UNICEF and the wider humanitarian community that undermine humanitarian principles, UNICEF should collaborate with others in the United Nations country team or the humanitarian country team to defend principled assistance and advocate for the State to meet its responsibilities as outlined in international humanitarian law;

(d) As part of its context analysis in complex humanitarian emergencies, UNICEF should routinely elicit and monitor community and partner perceptions about its engagement with the State and its impact on the way it is perceived in conflict-affected areas.

48. In evaluating security risk management and risk transfer, the evaluation found that across the case study countries, UNICEF transferred significant responsibility to its partners, third-party service providers and contractors, which frequently took on significant additional security risks, often with insufficient support for security risk management.

49. The evaluation recommends that UNICEF fulfil its moral obligation to systematically ensure that its partners, including NGO partners, third-party service providers and contractors, have measures in place to ensure duty of care for their staff in complex humanitarian emergencies. The recommendations are the following:

(a) In complex humanitarian situations, as part of due diligence, UNICEF country offices should determine that partners have adequate security risk management systems in place and explicitly include this as part of its selection criteria;

(b) While UNICEF engagement with third-party service providers is governed by the long-term agreements that it has in place, as part of its due diligence, UNICEF should assess the existing risk management systems and explicitly include this as part of its selection criteria.

⁹ This recommendation is consistent with UNICEF, Study on linking development and humanitarian action, January 2016.

C. Improving accountability to promote partnership and community acceptance

50. The evaluation highlighted that while UNICEF has a broad set of accountabilities, in unstable environments, two of the most important are to its partners and to affected people in whose name UNICEF raises funds and whom the organization seeks to assist. It is in these contexts that the needs are more acute and the risks are greater. It is also in these contexts that UNICEF support to partners and engagement with communities is not just the “right thing to do”, but also has the potential to strengthen both access, through community acceptance, and programme quality, by strengthening the capacity of partners to deliver assistance and the obtaining by UNICEF of feedback on programme adequacy and relevance.

51. At the country-office level, the evaluation concluded that UNICEF did not have a structured approach to accountability to affected people or a routine way of gauging community satisfaction with the coverage or quality of its programmes. This is important in complex humanitarian emergencies, as the provision of good-quality and accountable assistance can enhance an organization’s ability to sustain safe access. UNICEF staff in humanitarian crises need to better understand and act on their accountability commitments to people receiving its assistance¹⁰ and ensure that these are being routinely met. The recommendations are the following:

(a) UNICEF must ensure that its staff are familiar with how it defines its accountability to vulnerable communities and the responsibilities that this entails;

(b) Linked to the recommendation above, it is important that UNICEF clarify the practical steps required for it to meet these obligations in the context of working in partnership;

(c) UNICEF has used innovative approaches to support its staff and partners to engage with affected people targeted by UNICEF-funded assistance. There would be value in determining whether these are relevant to complex humanitarian emergencies and scalable as a means of meeting its accountability obligations as well as for increased programme effectiveness;

(d) One of the key purposes of engaging with communities is to gauge satisfaction with the appropriateness and effectiveness of assistance. At the country-office level, UNICEF has a responsibility to routinely collect, analyse and use this information to address concerns. To achieve this, UNICEF must ensure that there is latitude within its programmes to make course corrections to address communities’ concerns about coverage and quality.

52. In terms of strengthening localization and investing in partnerships, UNICEF makes insufficient investment in genuine partnerships with local and national actors, even where they have proven essential for access. There is a tendency for emphasis to be placed on one-off trainings or workshops over seeking to strengthen institutional capacity, despite the fact that the latter offers the greatest potential for strengthening coverage and quality over the long term.

53. UNICEF should provide greater, and more sustained support to local and national NGO partners in complex humanitarian emergencies, particularly in contexts

¹⁰ As defined in UNICEF, “Putting people at the centre of humanitarian action: integrating accountability to affected people” (forthcoming).

in which these organizations are best placed to strengthen coverage and quality. The recommendations are the following:

(a) In line with the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021, UNICEF should ensure clarity among its staff about its commitment to localization as a strategic engagement with local and national partners and its implications for the ways in which UNICEF seeks to support and strengthen such partners;

(b) In access-constrained environments, UNICEF partner review committees should assign priority to partners with the profile, contacts and networks to gain access to communities in greatest need of assistance, even when this means that UNICEF will need to address capacity weaknesses;

(c) With a view to strengthening coverage and quality, UNICEF should routinely undertake capacity assessments of its NGO partners in complex humanitarian emergencies as a means of identifying priorities for implementing capacity-development strategies with partners;

(d) As outlined in the recommendation on humanitarian principles above, UNICEF should (i) strengthen its engagement with partners on issues of gaining and maintaining principled access; (ii) be more proactive in using its network of interlocutors to advocate for partner access where assistance is requested and required; and (iii) strengthen the provision of support to partners for managing risk.

D. Influencing the external humanitarian architecture

54. Important shifts need to occur within the humanitarian system to strengthen coverage and quality in complex humanitarian emergencies that are external to UNICEF, but which it can influence. The United Nations security management system and the Department of Safety and Security specifically, have greater scope to facilitate humanitarian access, and at the inter-agency level, there is significant scope to strengthen collaborative approaches, for example, to addressing malnutrition.

55. Positive working relationships between the Department of Safety and Security and humanitarian agencies tend to be influenced by personality and background rather than structure or policy, which leads to inconsistencies. To navigate the challenges posed by participation in the United Nations security management system, UNICEF has employed its own security staff. The evaluation found that the varying levels of success achieved are linked to staff profile and personality as well as the roles and responsibilities given to these staff.

56. UNICEF should bring to the attention of the Inter-Agency Security Management Network the evidence from the present evaluation, the recent World Food Programme (WFP) access evaluation and the “Presence and proximity”¹¹ study to promote greater consistency in how the Department of Safety and Security applies its policies. Concurrently, UNICEF should continue to recruit and deploy high-capacity security officers to complex humanitarian emergencies to strengthen its access. The recommendations are the following:

(a) UNICEF should seek allies in the Inter-Agency Security Management Network with which to promote positive change within the United Nations security management system;

¹¹ Jackson, Ashley, and Steve Zyck, “Presence and proximity: to stay and deliver, five years on”, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, June 2017.

(b) Until change occurs, it will be important for UNICEF to continue to select high-calibre senior security officers to liaise with the humanitarian country team and the Department of Safety and Security and to support country offices in their engagement with the designated official to find relevant and principled approaches for humanitarian access;

(c) If the use of the programme criticality framework and the decisions of the designated official are considered overly restrictive, UNICEF should consistently document instances in which access requests are rejected to have evidence to escalate concerns and to support its advocacy on expanding access;

(d) In complex humanitarian situations, there is scope for country representatives to provide clearer guidance about expectations for staff travel to field offices and programme locations for the purposes of monitoring programme progress and providing support to partners;

(e) The use of low-profile missions is considered good practice in volatile environments and has played a key role in permitting UNICEF to support and monitor its programmes, but their use is limited to a small number of countries. UNICEF should seek to distil and share good practices to promote this approach more widely.

57. The evaluation found that one of the most significant partnerships from a quality and coverage perspective was between UNICEF and WFP for the delivery of integrated moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) and severe acute malnutrition (SAM) services in the Somalia pre-famine response. The integration encompassed an unprecedented level of collaboration between UNICEF and WFP, including efforts to harmonize approaches and overcome institutional barriers. There was a strong investment in preparation and in coordinated services, including delivery at shared sites using shared partners. Despite the existence of significant evidence about the benefits of the approach, it is not routinely used in complex humanitarian situations.

58. UNICEF should coordinate with WFP and the World Health Organization (WHO) to strengthen the institutional basis for and to provide technical direction on the continuum of care for acute malnutrition cases (i.e., the integration of SAM and MAM treatment). The recommendations are the following:

(a) UNICEF, WFP and WHO should share evidence and lessons from the integrated approach adopted in Somalia to strengthen the evidence base for joint action;

(b) These should be reviewed alongside similar practices elsewhere to provide a benchmark for the adoption of integrated SAM/MAM programmes in contexts characterized by poor continuity of care;

(c) To provide a foundation for the promotion of integrated programming, the memorandum of understanding between UNICEF, WFP and WHO should be revised to strengthen institutional support for the approach.

E. Adapting internal approaches and systems to strengthen coverage and quality

59. For UNICEF to maximize its coverage and quality in complex humanitarian emergencies, it needs to promote internal change in the way that it designs and delivers integrated programmes and disseminates, interprets and acts upon policies and procedures.

60. The evaluation found that simplified standard operating procedures (SSOPs) were widely endorsed by country offices during the evaluation, although there was significant variation in their use in Level 2, Level 3 and other emergencies. While some UNICEF country offices with a Level 3 activation did not make use of the simplifications, several offices of countries for which there was no corporate emergency activation were benefiting from their use.

61. As part of the revision of the SSOPs, UNICEF should also consider the use of specific simplifications to support humanitarian response outside of Level 2/Level 3 emergencies. The recommendations are the following:

(a) Given that the SSOPs strengthen the humanitarian effectiveness of UNICEF, the variability in their uptake should be explicitly addressed in the revisions currently under way;

(b) Given the broader use of SSOPs outside of Level 2/Level 3 emergencies, it is recommended that UNICEF strengthen the transparency and consistency of its decision-making by outlining broader humanitarian criteria under which the SSOPs may be applied. Included in this should be a requirement to document the reasons that country offices choose not to adopt the simplifications;

(c) UNICEF should define a light approval process for Level 1 emergencies to provide the country office with simplified fast-track human resources procedures and to give the country representative the option to activate, with a well-documented justification approved by the regional director, full access to any Level 2/Level 3 simplifications pertaining to the country-office level deemed critical for the coverage and quality of the humanitarian response;

(d) The slow pace of programme document submission and approval led to significant delays in humanitarian responses across all the case study countries. Although the simplifications offer time reductions, they are not consistently applied. It is recommended that UNICEF review the programme cooperation agreements/programme document processes with a view to streamlining.

62. To strengthen staff engagement with and understanding of key policy documents, UNICEF should develop more coherent, modular humanitarian learning and knowledge management mechanisms to ensure that staff working in complex humanitarian emergencies have adequate knowledge, skills and capacities to address the challenges that UNICEF experiences in achieving coverage and quality.

63. Based on the findings of the evaluation, key areas of focus should include the following:

(a) Delivering coverage and quality in complex humanitarian emergencies: key principles, UNICEF commitments and approach and how to resolve common dilemmas;

(b) Operationalizing the approach of UNICEF to equity in the context of complex humanitarian emergencies;

(c) Understanding and operationalizing humanitarian principles and international humanitarian principle in complex humanitarian situations;

(d) Engagement with States and non-State entities in contexts of conflict and fragility;

(e) The challenges of leadership in humanitarian action;

(f) Community engagement and translating the UNICEF accountability framework into practice;

(g) Understanding programme integration in UNICEF and laying the foundations for it in complex humanitarian emergencies;

(h) Risk-informed programming;

(i) Principled approaches to strengthening humanitarian-development linkages in complex humanitarian emergencies.

64. The adopted strategies must take into consideration the specific challenges faced by country offices in these contexts, which include high turnover and the need to onboard staff with modest prior humanitarian experience. Prioritization for learning should be placed on: (a) minimum levels of individual skills/knowledge differentiated by function (with the potential of links to individual testing); (b) minimum capacities/functions at the level of the country office team (with links to country office self-diagnosis and regional office quality assurance, triggering team-based learning on challenging skills application); and (c) a systematic strategy of building adequate leadership competencies.

65. The evaluation also pointed to the need to promote integrated programming within UNICEF. UNICEF has developed a wealth of policies, procedural guidance and tools to provide direction to staff in planning, managing and evaluating programmes in complex humanitarian contexts. However, the case studies provided limited evidence that, beyond the most experienced humanitarian staff and some senior managers, UNICEF global guidance documents are not consistently known and used in the field.¹²

66. The case for strengthening UNICEF programme integration in complex humanitarian emergencies has been made in previous studies and evaluations. It is now urgent that UNICEF create a policy and practice environment that enables progress to be made in achieving integration where it will strengthen humanitarian outcomes. The recommendations are the following:

(a) UNICEF should, on an expedited basis, update key texts, including the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action,¹³ the Programme Policy and Procedures Manual and, in emergency preparedness and response planning guidance, guidance on partnerships, to reflect the expectation that the integrated approach will be applied where it has the potential to strengthen humanitarian outcomes and can be achieved in a timely way;

(b) Drawing on examples from recent practice, UNICEF should document models of programme integration typically used to address humanitarian situations;

(c) To lay the foundations for programme integration, country offices in complex humanitarian emergencies should routinely examine opportunities as part of

¹² It is important to note that a lack of familiarity with policies and guidance does not necessarily result in obvious mismanagement or misconduct. The evidence from this evaluation shows a subtler pattern of missed opportunities owing to staff not being fully comfortable with or unwilling/unable to use the full range of flexible policies and procedures that UNICEF already has in place.

¹³ The ongoing revision of the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action offers an important opportunity to ensure that they are consistent with this recommendation.

their preparedness planning and, where these exist, lay the foundations for integrated assessments.

VI. Draft decision

The Executive Board

Takes note of the following documents presented to the Executive Board at its annual session of 2019:

1. Annual report for 2018 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2019/14](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2019/15](#));
2. Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies, its executive summary ([E/ICEF/2019/16](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2019/17](#)).

Annex

Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies

1. Due to space limitations, the evaluation report of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies is not contained within the present annex.
 2. The report is available from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website: https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/index_61171.html.
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