



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
3 July 2019

Original: English

**For decision**

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### United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

**Second regular session 2019**

11–13 September 2019

Item 8 of the provisional agenda\*

### **Strengthening child protection systems: evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance**

#### **Executive summary\*\***

#### *Summary*

This report presents the results of an evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance in child protection systems-strengthening (CPSS) at the country, regional and global levels. Child protection — defined on the basis of 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 to specific issues or populations considered especially vulnerable. Over the past decade, however, the need for more-sustainable outcomes has produced a gradual shift towards a more-holistic, comprehensive approach. As such, CPSS has been a strategic objective of UNICEF child protection work since the adoption of its Child Protection Strategy ([E/ICEF/2008/5/Rev.1](#)) in 2008.

Overall, the evaluation revealed the importance of conceptualizing systems-strengthening as a process differentiated by context: In settings in which the child protection system remains relatively weak or nascent, support for system-building is necessary, with system consolidation and system reform more appropriate in settings in which the existing child protection 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 stand-alone interventions (capacity-building/workforce strengthening) and as part of a package of interventions in more-advanced settings (evidence and research; policy advocacy; and leveraging public resources). 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.

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\* [E/ICEF/2019/21](#).

\*\* 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).

## I. Introduction

1. In 2008, UNICEF adopted a systems approach to child protection. Broader in scope and ambition than traditional issue-based approaches, such as efforts targeting child soldiers or addressing female genital mutilation, a systems approach seeks to ensure that children are being protected in a holistic manner fully consistent with their rights. Systems-strengthening involves enhancing the enabling environment, the 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 existed in different degrees of formality.

2. 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 in this report was an impartial yet collaborative process involving many stakeholders at across 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.

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

4. UNICEF has defined child protection systems<sup>1</sup> 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 comprise 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 various actors — children, families, communities, those working at the subnational 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 comprise the system.

5. UNICEF definitions, policies and strategic plans acknowledge that child protection systems tend to be multisectoral, cutting across the social welfare, education, health, justice, social protection and security sectors.<sup>2</sup> The organization understands that these systems must be strengthened through an integrated approach.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Save the Children and World Vision, “A better way to protect all children: the theory and practice of child protection systems”, conference report, New York, 2013, pp. 3. 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 other documents. As a working definition, the evaluation treated government-based elements as formal, while traditional community-based and non-governmental organization elements were treated as informal or “less formal”. Some elements, such as child protection committees, may span both structures.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the UNICEF 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”.

6. UNICEF has monitored its contributions to CPSS since 2012, when the results framework for the updated medium-term strategic plan 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 final results framework of the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021, 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”.

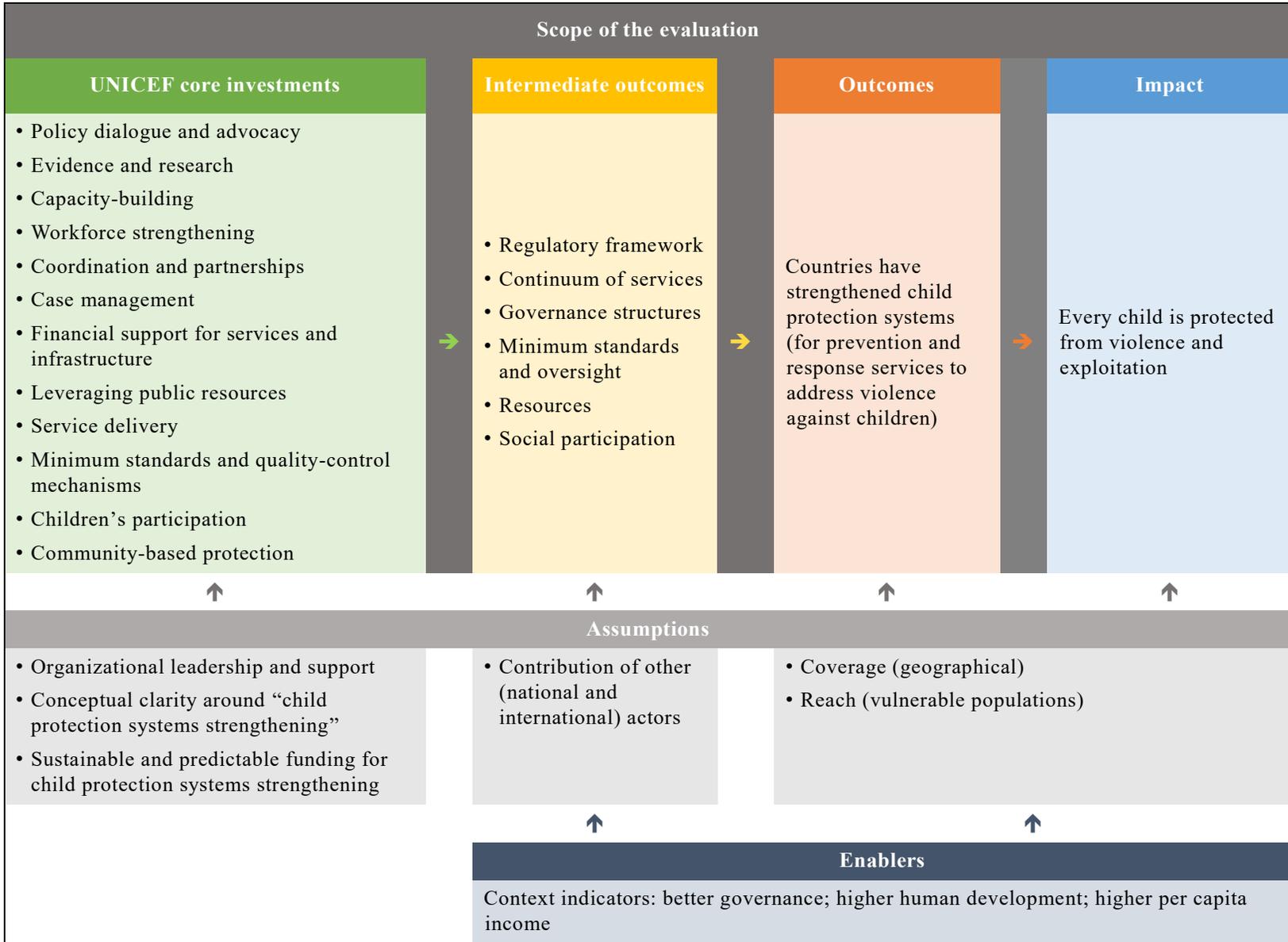
7. In the absence of a theory of change or results framework specifically for CPSS, and drawing upon the 2015 UNICEF Child Protection Resource Pack,<sup>3</sup> the Evaluation Advisory Group, convened to prepare and provide guidance during the evaluation process, identified six crucial elements that must 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 I 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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, “Child Protection Resource Pack: How to plan, monitor and evaluate child protection programmes”, UNICEF, New York, 2015. The sixth element (social participation) was added in consultation with the Associate Director, Programme Division, and the Evaluation Advisory Group to reflect recent changes in thinking about child protection systems.

<sup>4</sup> Goal Area 3 of the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 (Every child is protected from violence and exploitation) provides the impact statement set out in figure I. The UNICEF core investments include key interventions set out in the Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 and the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021.

Figure I  
**Proposed conceptual framework for the UNICEF child protection systems-strengthening approach**



8. The evaluation focused on analysing the UNICEF contribution to achieving the six key elements or intermediate outcomes at the 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 necessary for their functioning:

(a) 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;

(b) 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;

(c) 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, education, health and welfare sectors) involving formal and informal sectors, including a process of care that includes identification, referral, follow-up and response;

(d) 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;

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

(f) 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.

## II. Evaluation approach

9. This evaluation is the first comprehensive attempt to gather and analyse evidence about the application of CPSS across UNICEF. It has two overall purposes: (a) to contribute to learning and decision-making with a view to improving UNICEF programming; and (b) to support accountability on CPSS. It assesses the organization's global strategies and country-level programme performance to strengthen child protection systems 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 subnational levels in middle- and low-income countries and in fragile contexts. While the evaluation traces the organization's CPSS work over the past decade, the main time period under review is 2012 to 2018.

10. The evaluation was guided by 10 questions in combination with four of the standard evaluation criteria of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 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**

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

(a) How effective is UNICEF in global leadership and the leveraging of partnerships that strengthen child protection systems?

(b) How appropriate, adequate and coherent are UNICEF global strategies, planned results and guidance documents for strengthening child protection systems?

(c) How effective is the UNICEF regional leadership, guidance/support and leveraging role in helping to strengthen child protection systems at the national level?

(d) How adequately has UNICEF contributed to:

(i) Global efforts in generating and sharing relevant research knowledge/evidence;

(ii) Data collection and analysis of CPSS;

(iii) Monitoring and evaluation of the processes and results achieved by child protection systems?

12. At the institutional level, the evaluation asked:

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

13. Country-level questions included the following:

(f) How relevant and appropriate are the UNICEF country programme strategies and interventions related to strengthening child protection systems for securing the right of children to be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse?

(g) 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?

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

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

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

(j) To what extent do national programmes supported by UNICEF and related to CPSS:

- (i) engage with boys and girls of different ages, especially those considered particularly vulnerable, marginalized and from minority groups;
- (ii) take into account and respond to their specific protection-related needs?

15. 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: 12 were examined through documentary desk study, 6 drew additionally on remote interviews with key informants (UNICEF and partners) and 6 in-depth case studies drew on data collected during field missions through face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions with adolescents and field observation. Two regional office visits were combined with the country missions to collect additional regional-level data. Key informant interviews at the global level, a document review and two online surveys — one with UNICEF country office teams and one with government and civil society partners — completed the data sources. Finally, qualitative comparative analysis was used to examine which combinations of UNICEF investments most successfully contributed to CPSS within the set of 24 countries.

### **III. Selected findings of the evaluation**

16. The evaluation generated a total of 42 findings, a selection of which is presented here.

#### **A. Country-level findings**

##### **1. Relevance and appropriateness of UNICEF interventions in child protection systems-strengthening**

17. Overall, the evaluation found that CPSS approaches utilized 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. Country offices have gone to great lengths to ensure the alignment of CPSS efforts to country needs, including for legal and regulatory reform, in particular. Investments in evidence generation on child protection, e.g., mapping and assessment exercises, were highly valued by national partners. However, this emphasis on formal child protection systems may limit the extent to which CPSS addresses the needs of the most vulnerable rights-holders.

18. 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 child protection systems by creating single-issue, parallel child protection service-delivery channels. Cases from the evaluation that stand out as exceptions are Nigeria, Romania and Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, UNICEF built upon 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 the regional level to mobilize support for greater investment in child protection systems. Romania is one of several countries in Eastern

Europe in which UNICEF has supported a care- reform agenda over many years. With strong support from the European Union and the UNICEF regional office in Geneva, the Romania country office has successfully leveraged care reform and juvenile justice to push for the broader reform of the existing child protection system.

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

## **2. Effectiveness of UNICEF programmes, including from a gender/human rights perspective**

20. 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 I).

### **Intermediate outcome 1: A robust legal and regulatory framework, as well as specific policies related to child protection**

21. Support to bringing national legal and regulatory frameworks into alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international good practice and supporting specific policies related to child protection are areas in which UNICEF has made important contributions across all regions. At the same time, external factors were found to have hampered those contributions. Gaps remain with regard to implementation and enforcement and underlying systemic issues present obstacles in many countries. Decentralized systems, in which national legislation and policies are not necessarily binding at the regional level, pose a particular challenge. UNICEF has not yet invested significantly in documenting the ways in which customary law in various countries addresses child protection issues and how harmonization with national and subnational 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**

22. Overall, programme performance in terms of supporting the relationships between child protection 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 child protection systems work. The overarching challenge is that child protection systems are intersectoral 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).

23. In some cases, there is no clear lead ministry on child protection; 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 child protection 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 its setting up and supporting national child protection coordination structures, such as interministerial committees. Another challenge concerns vertical coordination — that is, operationalizing national legislation and policy at the subnational and local levels, including lines of action and reporting. In the view of several UNICEF partners and key informants, the

organization's work at the government policy and framework level has tended to leave out the role of NGOs, communities, families and other less-formal actors.

**Intermediate outcome 3: A continuum of services spanning prevention and response**

24. 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 to 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 child protection 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 the community level to provide effective prevention and response services where child rights violations actually occur.

25. A number of examples of UNICEF contributions to preventive services for child protection were identified, which broadly fell 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 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 child protection 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 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 child protection systems, however, direct financial support for services was sometimes effective.

**Intermediate outcome 4: Minimum standards and oversight (information, monitoring and accountability mechanisms)**

26. UNICEF has helped to introduce a range of data-collection and information-management systems to track the enforcement of standards and the handling of individual child protection 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.

27. Over the period under review, country offices supported a range of successful initiatives to support Governments in establishing accountability and oversight systems for child protection. These initiatives included the creation of independent structures or mechanisms (national ombudspersons and human rights/child rights tribunals) as well as government-run supervision and quality-control mechanisms for child protection systems (inspection units, information-management systems, quality-assurance systems). Key informant interviews and 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.

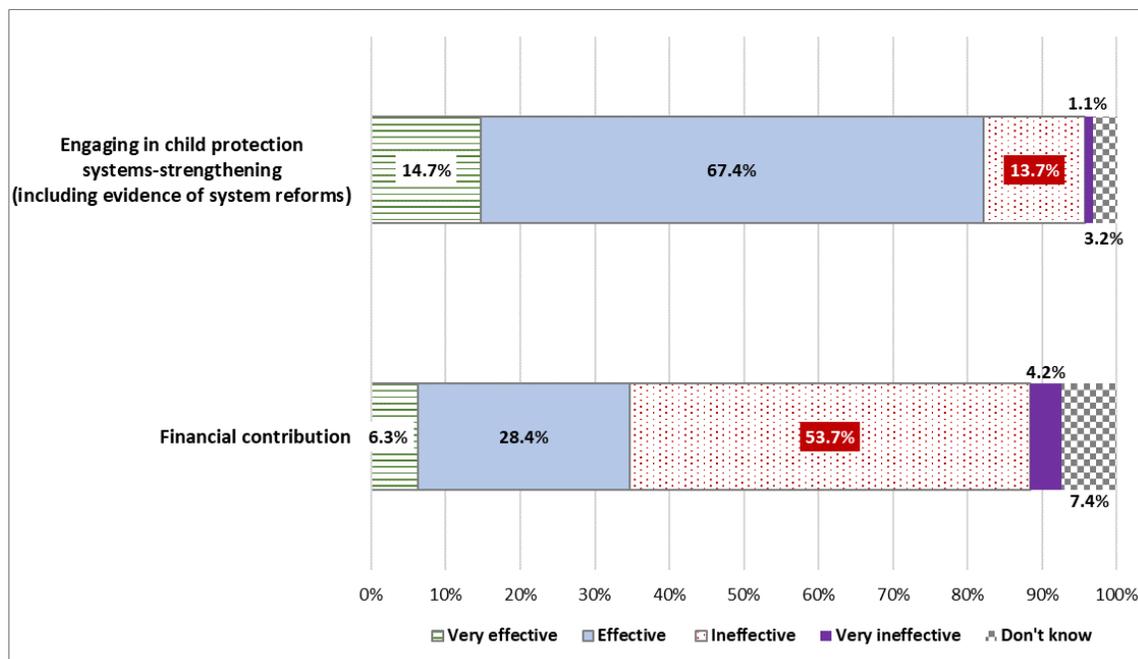
**Intermediate outcome 5: Human, financial and infrastructure resources**

28. With regard to human resources, the evaluation found that many country offices 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 child protection system. Many country offices now recognize that, given high levels of staff turnover in relevant sectors, the most sustainable approach may be to imbed training on child protection 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, Côte d'Ivoire, South Africa, the Sudan, Thailand and Zimbabwe. In addition, there are positive examples of support for community-based child protection mechanisms. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the absence of functioning government services, a "protective communities" approach has emerged to address child protection in areas in which UNICEF and key partners can operate. In Zimbabwe, a cadre of community care workers trained in child protection is linked to the national system through district social workers.

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

30. As shown in figure II, while UNICEF country-office staff feel they are effective in influencing national Governments to engage in the child protection systems approach, they report less success in catalysing financial contributions to child protection systems. The lack of consistent funding commitments by Governments and donors jeopardizes progress towards functional child protection systems and effective protection for children.

Figure II  
**UNICEF staff perceive that they are largely effective in engaging Government on child protection systems-strengthening, 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**

31. “Social participation” is an umbrella term created for the purposes of the evaluation. It encompasses 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 that they are being implemented. Overall, the evaluation found that UNICEF has not been systematic in supporting social participation as part of its CPSS efforts.

32. In several countries, UNICEF supports community sensitization via schools, child protection committees and volunteer workers and other avenues. However, the evaluation encountered few cases in which grassroots engagement practices — of children, communities, families and peers — around child protection 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 child protection systems.

33. Overall, across the six intermediate outcomes, UNICEF has been more effective in countries in which 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 its 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 for such support, poor coordination

between statutory and community-based child protection systems and weak data-generation and knowledge-management systems.

34. 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 is scarce.

35. To assess the contribution that UNICEF interventions have made to strengthening child protection systems, the qualitative comparative analysis looked at a set of 12 interventions, both in isolation and as part of packages of several activities. Of these, four kinds of investments were found to be particularly effective, and two others made solid contributions to CPSS.

**(a) Capacity-building/social-service workforce-strengthening (strongest single intervention)**

36. 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 with situations in which UNICEF does not invest in capacity-building. Workforce-strengthening (elements (b) and (c), above) was also highly influential: in each country in which UNICEF engaged in this kind of work, a successful outcome was observed.

**(b) Leveraging public resources (very effective in combination with other interventions)**

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

**(c) Evidence and research (very effective in combination with other interventions)**

38. 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 qualitative comparative analysis suggested that without this type of investment, success in CPSS is impossible. Most successful packages of interventions included evidence and research as key ingredients.

**(d) Policy dialogue and advocacy (very effective in combination with other interventions)**

39. UNICEF investments in policy dialogue and 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 and advocacy were key to several successful packages of interventions.

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

41. 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.

**(e) Sustainability of UNICEF interventions in child protection systems-strengthening**

42. The role of UNICEF is to support systems that are nationally owned, funded and run. Promising interventions identified by the evaluation include support to case management and coordination, which can be sustainable if institutionalized (nationally owned). In addition, some of the strategies found effective in the qualitative comparative analysis were also associated with sustainability: advocacy/building political commitment, leveraging resources and capacity-building. However, the lack of financial commitment by national Governments, coupled with weaknesses in UNICEF planning, undermines the sustainability of results achieved.

**3. Efficiency of UNICEF human and financial resources for child protection systems-strengthening**

43. Many stakeholders consulted for the evaluation considered that UNICEF managed its CPSS resources efficiently. Country offices implement many activities to strengthen child protection 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 adequate to support effective monitoring and reporting on CPSS.

**B. Institutional, global and regional findings**

**1. Institutional effectiveness: policies, strategies and monitoring and evaluation**

44. 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 CPSS conceptual framework. 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 on CPSS.

45. 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 and synthesis and in monitoring and evaluation limit the organization's influence in this sphere. Importantly, the indicators that are used agency-wide to identify progress towards more robust, sustainable and effective child protection systems remain weak, particularly in terms of their capacity to capture the effects of the UNICEF contribution.

**2. Global leadership, advocacy and partnerships**

46. There are good examples of strong CPSS partnerships developed through UNICEF initiatives at the national level. However, the available evidence suggests

that the organization has not been effective in sustaining its global-leadership role and in leveraging key partnerships to ensure the continuous strengthening of child protection 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 child protection issues have further disincentivized a greater focus on systems-strengthening.

### **3. Regional leadership, leveraging and support**

47. The evaluation found that UNICEF regional offices 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 several areas in which additional regional office support would be valued, including more practical guidance on what needs to be done to strengthen child protection systems in different contexts and what results can reasonably be expected.

48. Findings are presented in full in chapters 3 and 4 of the evaluation report.

## **IV. Conclusions**

### **Conclusion 1**

49. After a decade of work in this area, conceptual clarity on CPSS 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.

50. At the most basic level, there is a lack of clear 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.

### **Conclusion 2**

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

52. The desired balance and connection between the UNICEF issue-based and systems approaches to child protection have not been spelled out. A related operational challenge is the relationship between the systems-strengthening approach and work to address violence against children, which has been positioned as the unifying umbrella concept in Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 and Goal Area 3 of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021. More generally, there is little clarity or systematic evidence on how to choose the best entry point for CPSS. Finally, the UNICEF programmatic approach to CPSS has so far not distinguished between different levels of functioning or maturity of national child protection systems.

### **Conclusion 3**

53. 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.

54. In most countries reviewed as part of this evaluation, the UNICEF role in evidence generation, systems mapping and assessments and the costing of child

protection systems has helped to change the understanding of government partners. UNICEF technical support has also helped to improve key components of child protection systems. However, in most cases, this shared effort has not resulted in resource commitments from Governments.

#### **Conclusion 4**

55. Donors have played a largely negative role in advancing national child protection 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 CPSS.

56. Many donors primarily require readily and quickly measurable results expressed in terms of numbers of children benefitted. This has led to the favouring of parallel service-delivery systems that undermine systems-strengthening. 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 child protection system.

#### **Conclusion 5**

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

58. 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 child protection systems. However, there is still a long way to go in most of the countries reviewed. The UNICEF contribution to CPSS has been particularly strong with regard to strengthening the legal and regulatory framework. In general, UNICEF support was less successful where child protection systems were embryonic and more successful in countries in which UNICEF supported the Government-led reform of existing child protection systems.

#### **Conclusion 6**

59. The evaluation has identified a number of interventions that are particularly effective for strengthening child protection 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.

60. Stronger child protection systems benefit most from UNICEF investments in evidence and research; the leveraging of public resources; and policy advocacy. 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. In countries with weaker child protection systems, UNICEF often invests significantly in community-based child protection mechanisms and provides direct financial and technical support for child protection services and infrastructure.

#### **Conclusion 7**

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

62. Some of the objectives of UNICEF in terms of child protection systems-strengthening are oriented to the short and medium term, whereas achieving functional child protection systems is an ambitious long-term goal. 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.

Relatedly, in better-functioning systems, child protection results often rely on a network of allied health, education and social-protection systems that shoulder the main burden of prevention and early intervention.

#### **Conclusion 8**

63. UNICEF has a clear niche focusing on State accountabilities for children's rights and partnering with government departments at the 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.

64. 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 qualitative comparative analysis 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 in relation 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.

#### **Conclusion 9**

65. Investments into staff capacities and learning for child protection systems-strengthening have been insufficient.

66. In some countries and regions, 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 child protection staff, and includes public finance, institutional development, results-based management, research and analytical skills and strategic leadership skills (convening, persuading and influencing). These competencies do not seem to have been sufficiently considered in the hiring, promotion and retention of staff or in learning initiatives.

#### **Conclusion 10**

67. 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.

68. Coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS have yet to be established, both at the level of the intermediate outcomes (elements of the child protection system) and at the level of UNICEF expenditures and investments contributing to these outcomes. For the period 2014–2017, in particular, it has been difficult to assess investments, as it is unclear which ones were considered "systems-strengthening" at the country-office level when expenditures were recorded. Evidence from the UNICEF corporate results-reporting systems, while markedly improved as part of the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021, remains patchy. 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.

## V. Recommendations

### **1. Make clear the UNICEF definition of and role in child protection systems-strengthening and ensure that this approach is prioritized in organizational strategies, policies and plans.**

69. Large, issue-based initiatives have in recent years been perceived to undermine the systems approach to child protection and systems-strengthening efforts. In addition, the relationship between systems-strengthening and protection from violence against children — as the new unifying umbrella concept in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 — needs clarification.

#### **1.1. Through a consultative process, clarify the desired relationship between issue-based and systems approaches in UNICEF child-protection work and refine the draft programme-impact pathway for CPSS created for this evaluation, specifying:**

- (a) UNICEF corporate-priority entry points and vehicles for CPSS, if any;
- (b) The relationship between violence against children and CPSS, drawing on the theory of change and programme guidance for violence against children and other sources;
- (c) How UNICEF work relates to both statutory and community-based child protection systems, grounded in a rights-based approach and recognizing the normative role of UNICEF in CPSS.

70. The above process should also clarify:

- (a) The intersectorality of child protection systems, i.e., the core elements of the system as well as the allied elements from other sectors and the ways in which UNICEF can support their interplay in the continuum of services, looking at opportunities through UNICEF work in communication for development, public finance and other cross-sectoral approaches.
- (b) How CPSS relates to specific vulnerabilities (gender, disability, etc.) and situations (children on the move, separated children, children in institutions, children working and/or living on the street and homeless children, etc.);
- (c) The role girls and boys should play in participating in their own protection, building on General Comment No. 12 (2009) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child concerning the right of the child to be heard.

#### **1.2. Specify the phases of the CPSS process for different contexts and over time (system-building, consolidation and reform, or a similar typology to be determined).**

71. In so doing, care should be taken to document lessons from the early stages of the CPSS process, including in humanitarian settings, which are currently less-well understood.

#### **1.3. Reflect this clarified narrative on CPSS in any future update of the UNICEF Child Protection Strategy of 2008, setting out accountabilities for CPSS work among the various actors within the organization.**

72. On recommendation 1, the Child Protection Section should lead, with wider consultation in the Programme Division (health, social policy, etc.) and the Office of Emergency Programmes, with the involvement of child protection staff at the regional and country levels and senior management at the headquarters level. This recommendation is a high priority and should be implemented immediately.

**2. Invest in the most impactful CPSS areas, according to the UNICEF niche, to strengthen child protection systems.**

73. The evaluation showed that some of the UNICEF investments in CPSS have yielded better results than others. 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 forums through which to push the CPSS agenda.

74. UNICEF should:

**2.1 Prioritize the most-effective and sustainable interventions identified by the evaluation, namely social-service workforce-strengthening; the leveraging of public resources; evidence and research; policy advocacy; child-protection information systems; case management; and coordination.**

75. In examining which systems-strengthening interventions work in specific contexts, the evaluation found important differences related to country context and stage of systems development. A more-tailored approach to prioritization should be able to discern the most apt interventions based on context and phase (i.e., what works best where?).

**2.2 Roll out a menu of interventions in each priority area, with a different package of options tailored to each phase of the CPSS process, as described in recommendation 1.2 (systems-building, consolidation or reform) and clearly setting out what investments are required at different levels (formal/less formal) of the child protection system.**

76. This should include issuing programme guidance outlining the minimum package of UNICEF interventions by phase, with attention to CPSS in humanitarian action, from prevention through early intervention.

77. On recommendation 2, the Child Protection Section should lead, with wider consultation in the Programme Division and with senior management, regional advisors and key partner agencies. This recommendation is a high priority and should be implemented immediately.

**3. Strengthen staff and partner capacities and learning on CPSS.**

78. CPSS is an area of work that requires a skill set beyond that typically found in child protection staff and includes public finance, institutional development, results-based management, research and analytical skills and strategic leadership skills. These competencies need to be fostered within UNICEF and among partners to support effective CPSS. In addition, UNICEF needs to do more to support learning between countries and regions with similar profiles and challenges.

79. UNICEF should:

**3.1 At the headquarters level, revise job descriptions for child protection chiefs and invest in learning and skills development for staff and partners, e.g., by:**

(a) Connecting staff and partners with training opportunities in public finance and results-based management;

(b) Devising practical protocols to (i) track and analyse public expenditure for child protection in national and subnational budgets; and (ii) monitor results of UNICEF-supported CPSS interventions;

(c) Developing a resourced learning hub to systematically share knowledge, lessons learned and success stories in relation to CPSS programming and to develop and share tools to deal with constraints.

80. Headquarters should ensure sufficient staffing to carry the CPSS portfolio, including global-level knowledge exchange and learning, and seek closer collaboration with the social-policy and social-protection sectors.

**3.2 At the regional office level, step up technical assistance for CPSS, e.g., by:**

- (a) Assessing capacities at the country-office level to provide strategic leadership to CPSS processes;
- (b) Developing technical-support mechanisms, especially for countries that have so far not been able to make significant strides towards building child protection systems;
- (c) Supporting countries to invest early in the CPSS process in information; gender- and human rights-responsive monitoring; and feedback mechanisms.
- (d) Regional offices should ensure the regional monitoring of CPSS through staffing or long-term agreements.

**3.3 At the country-office level, CPSS should be embraced as a learning function and a cross-cutting and management responsibility, e.g., by:**

- (a) Documenting experiences, particularly on scaling up and innovation in systems work; on strengthening links between community and formal government protection structures and systems; and on CPSS in humanitarian and least-developed settings;
- (b) Fostering joint work and exchange across programme sections;
- (c) Systematically engaging country representatives in CPSS work;
- (d) Routinely including the identification of “vehicles” for CPSS (issues or projects through which a systems approach can be strengthened) in situation analyses;
- (e) Reflecting the skill set needed for effective CPSS in hiring, promotion and retention practices for child protection chiefs and staff;
- (f) Supporting the capacity development of national partners, including in results-based management for CPSS.

81. On recommendation 3, the Child Protection Section should lead, with wider consultation with the Programme Division and the Office of Emergency Programmes, the Office of Research-Innocenti, regional directors, regional child-protection advisers, country representatives, the UNICEF division responsible for field monitoring (currently the Field Results Group) the Division of Human Resources and key partner agencies. This recommendation is a high priority for implementation once recommendations 1 and 2 have been acted upon.

**4. Leverage partnerships and resources for CPSS.**

82. UNICEF should step up its efforts to revitalize partnerships and advocacy in favour of CPSS.

83. The organization should:

**4.1 Starting immediately, systematically include a budget line for CPSS programming and related monitoring and evaluation in large-scale donor agreements on issue-focused child protection work, including in humanitarian action.**

**4.2 Develop a partnerships and resourcing strategy for CPSS, assisting donors to open up to supporting systems-strengthening. Implementation should include:**

(a) Seeking new partnerships for CPSS, including with philanthropic foundations and governance, financing and social policy-orientated institutions (e.g., World Bank);

(b) Revitalizing initiatives to build consensus among major donors around the need to finance CPSS, building, for example, on lessons learned from the Zimbabwe experience.

**4.3 Improve public finance for child protection services and systems, building on the successful financial benchmarking work done to date and through closer collaboration with social policy teams at the country level by:**

(a) Carrying out rapid reviews of expenditures and financing strategies for CPSS at the national level to identify the true level of CPSS spending and sources of financing;

(b) Stepping up efforts to make the investment case for child protection and CPSS, including through hands-on work to leverage funds from ministries of finance;

(c) Documenting the domestic resources available and analysing how well these are spent.

**4.4 Invest in communications and advocacy, including by putting forward business cases across the range of CPSS contexts. Implementation should include:**

(a) Developing advocacy briefs on CPSS for various audiences, including internal audiences, donors and Governments in programme countries;

(b) Ensuring that CPSS is duly reflected in the emerging child protection advocacy strategy;

(c) Speaking out at key conferences and in web-based forums and interest groups about the UNICEF priorities and niche in CPSS, in accordance with recommendation 2.1.

84. On recommendation 4, the Child Protection Section should lead, with the participation of the Social Inclusion Section in the Programme Division; the UNICEF division responsible for planning and monitoring (currently the Data, Research and Policy Division), the Division of Communication and the Public Partnerships Division, as well as senior management at headquarters and in the field. This effort is a high priority.

**5. Address the CPSS data and measurement challenges.**

85. Part of what is perceived as lack of conceptual clarity on CPSS is linked to the absence of coherent corporate-level metrics and the scarcity of global-level data and evidence across the steps of the CPSS results chain. This in turn is linked with difficulties in demonstrating results and mobilizing resources for CPSS.

UNICEF should:

**5.1 Invest in coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS, including:**

(a) Defining indicators for CPSS, drawing on work already done in East Asia and the Pacific, the Latin America and Caribbean, India and elsewhere, and linking this process to Sustainable Development Goal measurement efforts and the work of the health, social-protection and other sectors;

(b) Establishing qualitative and quantitative milestones and benchmarks for measuring progress along the different phases of CPSS (rather than just at the final

stage of “functioning child protection systems”) and identifying means of verification;

(c) Investing further in such tools as child protection systems scorecards or indices and child protection information systems and dashboards to strengthen accountabilities and reinforce a consistent and coherent CPSS narrative as well as gender- and human rights-responsiveness;

(d) As part of the “collaborating for results” initiative, ensure that CPSS investments and results can be systematically tracked.

## **5.2 Close evidence gaps along the CPSS programme-impact pathway, to include:**

(a) The development of methodologies for measuring the impact of CPSS on the well-being of boys and girls of different ages, abilities and positions in society;

(b) The generation of prevalence data for violence, exploitation and abuse, including through the systematic use of the child protection module in the multiple indicator cluster survey and Demographic and Health Survey;

(c) Gender and equity analyses of child protection case-management data to assess the inclusiveness and reach of CPSS;

(d) Operational research on emerging issues, e.g., CPSS for children on the move;

(e) The strengthening of evaluation coverage on CPSS and learning from evaluations (e.g., through a meta-analysis on lessons learned from systems-strengthening (see lesson 1)) and tracking the ways in which evaluations are used.

86. The implementation of recommendation 5 should involve the Child Protection Section, the UNICEF divisions responsible for planning and monitoring (currently the Fields Results Group and the Division of Data, Research and Policy), the Office of Research-Innocenti, the Evaluation Office, regional directors and country representatives. This effort is a very high priority, for immediate implementation (with some level of sequencing for 5.1, which builds on recommendations 1 and 2).

## **VI. Draft decision**

### *The Executive Board*

*Takes note* of the evaluation report on strengthening child protection systems: evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance, its executive summary ([E/ICEF/2019/23](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2019/24](#)).

## **Annex**

### **Strengthening child protection systems: evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance**

Due to space limitations, the evaluation report titled strengthening child protection systems: evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance is not contained in the present annex. The report is available from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website:

[https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index\\_103557.html](https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_103557.html)

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