EVALUATION OF UNICEF’S EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS SYSTEMS

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Background and rationale for the evaluation

Emergencies have a negative effect on the realization of the rights of UNICEF’s core beneficiary groups. In 2012, UNICEF and its partners responded to 286 humanitarian situations of varying degrees in 79 countries\(^1\). UNICEF’s involvement in emergency situations is expected to increase as emergencies become more frequent. It is therefore important that UNICEF effectively prepares for emergencies, both independently and in collaboration with national governments and partners, and also ensures that adequate investment has been made to this end. Recent audits and evaluations\(^2\), however, have pointed to uneven emergency preparedness (EP) across emergencies.

This independent evaluation was commissioned by UNICEF’s Evaluation Office (EO) to pinpoint the specific gaps in UNICEF’s EP policies and systems that need to be addressed or strengthened.

Objective

The evaluation’s objective is to examine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency\(^3\), connectedness, sustainability and coverage of UNICEF’s current EP systems across its global operations\(^4\). Its main purpose is to help UNICEF become better prepared for the wide range of emergencies it faces – and to blunt the effects of emergencies when they do occur – and thus help it save more lives and reduce human suffering in ever-better ways. In order to look both back and ahead, the evaluation considers the evolution of UNICEF’s EP systems to date as a means of tracking progress. The evaluation is both summative and formative (with emphasis on the latter).

Evaluation approach and methodology

The evaluation was based on standard methodology, which involved key informant interviews, semi-structured focus group workshops, field observations through visits to seven countries – carried out from December 2012 to April 2013 – a survey of UNICEF staff, secondary research and data analysis.

For the purpose of this evaluation, an Inferred Logic Model (ILM) was developed based on the range of activities and stated objectives of UNICEF’s EP. The ILM outlines five outcomes that UNICEF’s EP efforts would achieve, namely:

- strengthened UNICEF and inter-agency preparedness and capacities to respond to emergencies;
- strengthened national preparedness and capacities to respond to emergencies;
- specific programmatic outcomes achieved that target the root causes of emergencies;

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\(^3\) For the purpose of this evaluation, ‘efficiency’ is broadly defined to include areas ranging from how effectively UNICEF has allocated its human and financial resources to its preparedness work, to cost-effectiveness and cost-efficiency considerations. The evaluation did not perform formal cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness analyses because preparedness activities are, generally, intermixed with normal programming expenditures.

\(^4\) The original Terms of Reference for this evaluation can be found in Annex F.
• improved international humanitarian response; and
• increased capacity of national and sub-national actors (including communities) to prevent, respond and recover from emergencies.

The evaluation team examined the following five outcomes to construct its five specific areas of inquiry:

1. Management and organization
2. Resources
3. Short- and long-term programming
4. Partnership
5. Measuring outcomes for children

Findings and conclusions

UNICEF has made progress in incorporating EP into its operations, and these measures have likely contributed to better emergency response. While this progress was documented throughout the evaluation, integration of EP has been ad hoc and limited in nature.

This evaluation observed that UNICEF's humanitarian activities are orientated towards emergency response rather than preparation or mitigation. Constraints identified in this report that hinder improved EP include: inadequate articulation of vision, goals, definitions and strategy; ad hoc funding; inconsistent application of programming; lack of integration of policies, practices and standards; limited accountability and lack of performance measurement and reporting activities.

EP is recognized as a responsibility within UNICEF at all levels. However, the concept remains nebulous due to the lack of a common goal, strategy and definition articulated through the organization.

UNICEF does not employ a standardized or consistent risk analysis process that is implemented by all country offices (CO). This results in variations in risk assessment procedures and decreased accuracy of forecasting future emergencies. Inadequate risk assessment also contributes to insufficient or inappropriate EP activities.

In most cases, EP is better organized by COs in contexts where the emergency risk is high and where governments and other actors have a limited capacity for response. UNICEF is better organized to respond to sudden crises in comparison to slow onset crises.

Moving from the Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan (EPRP) to the Early Warning Early Action (EWEA) system has resulted in a more transparent EP process at the CO level, except in those COs where EWEA is not used. EWEA provides an opportunity to develop a systematic and consistent EP process across all COs. However, usage of EWEA remains variable. While some COs use the EWEA tool to facilitate an EP process, others disregard it and in yet others, EWEA is used only for compliance with Headquarter’s (HQ) requirements. EWEA may inadvertently contribute to a lack of EP because completing system requirements is sometimes equated with being prepared as a CO. Regional offices (RO) and HQ, which largely focus on the administrative and usage aspects of the EWEA system (rather than on the outcome of EP activities), implicitly encourage this, rather than focusing on how the system can record, facilitate and ultimately contribute to better response outcomes. Staff do not have a general perception of the EWEA system as a practical tool to be used in a time of emergency.
UNICEF has organizational structures that have contributed to better EP. However, EP is marginalized in smaller offices where EP responsibilities become part of a portfolio of duties held by one staff person. ROs dedicate more time and support to COs with high risk of emergency situations or low capacities. The natural divide between programme development and humanitarian response impedes optimization and coordination of EP.

UNICEF’s inconsistent and/or limited gathering and analysis of EP-related data has precluded adequate monitoring, evaluation, analysis and understanding of the impact and effectiveness of EP activities. The challenge in acquiring funding for EP is exacerbated by the difficulty in making a clear data-driven case for how EP contributes to better response.

UNICEF has created several human resources (HR) mechanisms to enhance its ability to respond rapidly to emergency situations. Currently, data that would allow for analysis of how these mechanisms specifically contribute to better EP outcomes at the CO level is not being collected. The HR mechanisms in place, such as the Immediate Response Team and Emergency Response Team, may be overwhelmed by large or multiple emergencies. EP is not formally prioritized as a core duty of UNICEF staff and therefore mechanisms for accountability and performance measurement of staff (such as regular appraisals) have not been institutionalized. Rosters provide an important surge response mechanism, but lack depth of experience and have gaps in necessary skill sets. Capacity building activities, while perceived by management to deliver improved EP, are inconsistent and unsystematic in their delivery/application across the organization.

UNICEF’s current financial commitments to EP are inadequate to sustain the scope and depth of activities necessary for consistent and systematic EP globally. Delivering “predictable, effective and timely collective humanitarian action”, as envisioned by the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs) appears problematic given the inconsistency of funding allocated to EP activities. COs have been unable to re-programme or allocate financial resources for EP on a consistent or systematic basis because UNICEF has not specifically prioritized EP at the corporate level. UNICEF has not yet built a robust, evidence-based case for donors through effective monitoring and evaluation of EP activities that will result in consistent and adequate short- and long-term funding for EP.

Existing guidance for Emergency Risk Informed Programming (ERIP) is not used systematically, nor is there general awareness of ERIP across the organization. While measuring results for EP in programming is acknowledged and desired, execution of the same is questionable. Improving accountability structures related to preparedness, such as regular reporting requirements, will serve the adoption of ERIP design, implementation and monitoring.

UNICEF’s participation in humanitarian response is substantial. While there is a positive trend in the number of emergencies UNICEF has responded to, this number has decreased in recent years. While UNICEF’s participation in responses may continue to grow in the foreseeable future, it is also possible that participation has peaked. This evaluation is unable to determine specifically if/how EP activities have reduced risk or contributed to or detracted from specific responses, or impacted UNICEF’s response to emergencies more generally, because of a lack of data.

Business continuity is generally well served at the CO level for UNICEF and contributes to sustaining operations in times of emergencies. A better understanding of the application of contingency planning would positively serve EP at the CO level.
The awareness and implementation of EP actions by major implementing partners is equivalent to, or more comprehensive than, UNICEF’s EP actions. The majority of UNICEF CO staff are satisfied (particularly emergency staff and monitoring and evaluation staff – less so general management and operations staff) with the level of awareness among, and competence of, major partners with respect to EP. Satisfaction with coordination across other United Nations agencies was also high among UNICEF staff, particularly emergency coordinators, less so among operations staff.

UNICEF’s efforts to mainstream EP concepts and practice into emergency rather than mainstream development programming has led to greater, though not yet universal, acceptance that an effective response to emergencies requires, among other things, good EP. UNICEF’s Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)-level activities have influenced EP thinking in important ways, such as by highlighting the necessity for, and promoting the application of, a common EP framework. However, this advocacy at the IASC level has so far had limited tangible outputs in terms of policies and practices being implemented by other IASC members. Given the consensus among key stakeholders that UNICEF is a leader in the policy and practices of EP, energetic and constructive input from UNICEF on EP should be maintained for the foreseeable future.

UNICEF is committed to strengthening the capacity of its national, sub-national and community partners and EP capacity is one of many potential areas of collaboration.

Implementing partnerships with government, while a priority for UNICEF, is challenging for a variety of context-specific reasons. As such, while the evaluation finds that UNICEF is committed to this concept, it remains challenging in terms of systematic or consistent delivery.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusions above, the evaluation presents the following recommendations for action:

1. **Design, communicate and implement a global strategy for EP that will result in a systematic implementation of a coherent system based on context and risk analysis across CO and RO levels.** The design and implementation of the system should provide for a clear definition of EP in the context of UNICEF’s mission and ensure that accountabilities at various levels are clearly laid out to integrate it into regular work and programming. The EP systems and processes should ensure clear criteria for when and how response can be ‘triggered’ in slow-onset crises through a review of past experience, collaboration with peers and better information management of future situations. The design of the system should take into account the need to expand and deepen existing HR mechanisms and capacity building processes to support EP to ensure UNICEF has access to adequate personnel with the necessary skill sets, and that capacity development with respect to EP is available to existing staff.

2. **Increase the financial commitment to EP to match the needs of increasing emergency response in UNICEF and ensure that financial allocations for EP are integrated into CO programming as a percentage depending on risk perception.** The activities and financing of EP do not match that allocated to emergency response. It is important to review needs at all levels and make realistic financial allocations with the understanding that better preparedness saves money and improves response.

3. **Expand linkages to existing national and global EP systems led by partners and governments to create added value.** While there is coherence between UNICEF’s EP strategy...
at the county level and the EP strategies of its partners, there is room for innovation and improved systems. Furthermore, while developing links with government systems may be challenging, it is important to review the gaps and inconsistencies between national systems and UNICEF’s EP strategy so they can be addressed at the design stage. Most importantly, national capacity building should be an integral part of any UNICEF EP strategy.

4. **Establish a simple and cost effective system to enhance data availability for monitoring, reporting and evaluation to promote understanding of how EP leads to better response, what works best, and how to improve and innovate in the future.** The indicators for data collection should be linked to the outcomes in the CCC and should show with a theory of change how the various indicators are linked to better lives for children. All EP activities should lead to clear conclusions about whether or not UNICEF’s EP leads to achievement of the CCCs.