Communication for Development: An Evaluation of UNICEF’s Capacity and Action

Communication for development (C4D) is the application of the principles of effective communication to further development objectives. By amplifying the voices of children and communities and empowering individuals and communities to take actions to improve their lives, C4D contributes to promoting child survival, development, protection and participation. UNICEF is recognized as one of the lead international agencies in promoting and using C4D as a cross-cutting strategy to drive positive behavioural and social change for children and their families.

C4D is central to all areas of UNICEF’s work. Many of the targets in UNICEF’s strategic plans are strongly dependent on use of behavioural and social change strategies for realizing their impact, scale and sustainability. In the current 2014–17 strategic plan, C4D is positioned under the ‘capacity development’ implementation strategy and C4D related components (knowledge, attitudes, practices, norms) are integrated into key result areas as demand side and enabling factors that every sectoral area has to work on. UNICEF has made substantial investment in developing both its internal capacity and the capacity of national partners in designing and implementing C4D strategies. It has also taken significant steps towards integrating C4D into systems, policies, plans and practices at all levels of the organization.

Given UNICEF’s investment in C4D, this global evaluation was commissioned to look back over the past five years (2010-15) and identify what has worked, areas for improvement and lessons learnt for evaluation readiness. The evaluation assessed the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of UNICEF’s internal capacity development strategies and interventions relating to C4D; as well as the extent to which C4D functions have been integrated into UNICEF offices and programmes in terms of strategy, planning, resourcing, monitoring and reporting. Further, the evaluation appraised C4D related planning and implementation against a set of global benchmarks, reviewed C4D related performance monitoring and knowledge management, and assessed the evaluability of results C4D contributes to.

The evaluation design was formative and focused on identifying improvements and learning on C4D capacity development and programming. It was built around testing the theory of change that underpinned UNICEF’s efforts to build capacity and integrate C4D in programming. Figure 1 (overleaf) shows a simplified, linear version of how change is expected to come about: Investments in training through global courses, knowledge platforms and internal advocacy are expected to help build UNICEF’s capacity in C4D which in turn is projected to contribute to better programming, i.e. programming which integrates and implements C4D strategies. This is in turn expected to lead to behaviour and social norm alteration that will contribute to positive change for children and women.

For more information, visit www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_C4D.html
The evaluation used data from a global survey, extensive document reviews, five country cases studies, 25 desk review country studies and key informant interviews.

Findings regarding UNICEF’s C4D capacity development initiatives

The evaluation found that the use of global courses such as the “C4D Learning Course”, run by Ohio University, and “Advances in Social Norms and Social Change”, run by the University of Pennsylvania, has been an appropriate strategy for UNICEF to build internal C4D capacity. Given the scarcity of adequate training opportunities in most regions, a centralised global C4D training programme has enabled UNICEF to keep close oversight of course content and quality. This was necessary to build a common understanding of C4D in UNICEF. However, the costs of both courses prevent them from being continued indefinitely or significantly scaled up.

Country and regional level trainings have also played an important role in building staff capacity, although too often these are delivered as standalone activities rather than as part of a longer-term capacity development programme. This has limited their effectiveness.

Efforts to create an enabling organisational environment for C4D have had more mixed results. While there have been successes in increasing overall C4D staff numbers, and establishing clear HQ accountabilities on C4D, attempts at creating champions among senior managers were not always successful. Particularly at the country level there is varied backing among section chiefs for C4D which limits its potential adoption. The lack of a clear strategy for how UNICEF would engage senior managers has contributed to this.

Integration of C4D at the country, regional and HQ level

At country level, the picture of how well C4D has been integrated into structures, strategies, plans and resourcing is mixed. While some country offices stand out, there is significant room for improvement in the majority of the 25 offices reviewed. Common gaps include: absence of a clear vision and strategy for C4D either at the level of the country programme or individual sections; a lack of C4D integration into core planning documents such as Situation Analyses and an ambiguity in C4D’s position in and contribution to the Country Programme Results Framework; and insufficient resourcing (human and financial) to meet the needs of the country programme.

At regional level, there has been some progress in integrating C4D but this varies across regions. Staff capacity in particular is an issue in some
offices. Across the board, there is room for improvement as to how C4D is reflected in office management plans. At NYHQ level, C4D is well integrated into the 2014-17 Strategic Plan with behaviour and social change reflected in all sector results areas, but its positioning under the ‘Capacity Development’ and ‘Service Delivery’ implementation strategies has resulted in less profile in reporting on C4D across the organization, as compared to the 2006-2013 Medium-Term Strategic Plan where C4D was a stand-alone strategy. Resourcing of the C4D Section remains an issue.

Implementation of C4D through country programmes

Implementation was assessed by looking at CO performance against a set of global C4D benchmarks, and lessons were distilled from across the country case/desk studies. Overall, country offices show an average performance across the C4D benchmarks that were used as proxies for implementation quality (see Table 1). Few countries were outstanding and none were doing very badly. This indicates that the quality of C4D implementation is sound, but with room for improvement. The country offices in the sample that performed highest across all benchmarks were UNICEF Mozambique, Nigeria, India and Bangladesh.

The evaluation also distilled lessons on UNICEF’s work to strengthen the C4D capacity of partners and found that this is a bottleneck overall. Although building partner capacity is a priority for the majority of country offices, this was generally not done systematically and often lacked long-term vision. Demand for C4D capacity building among partners is high but many offices struggle to meet it.

Evaluability of C4D interventions and results

The evaluation assessed evaluability considerations by examining (a) whether the underlying logic of the programme was clear and the contribution of C4D (i.e. behaviour and social norms change) clearly articulated and (b) whether monitoring data was robust enough to inform a future evaluation on the effects of C4D activities on behaviour/social change. The evaluation found that in none of the country programmes reviewed would it be possible to evaluate the contribution of C4D initiatives and strategies to the results of the country programme as a whole. This is because the positioning of C4D results in the Country Office Results Frameworks is often unclear and monitoring data on behaviour change and social norms change is either not being collected or of poor quality.

At present, the resources allocated to evaluating the impact of C4D interventions are insufficient to effectively build the evidence base on C4D. Without robust indicators and data on C4D there will not be credible proof of its impact, and without proven impact it will be difficult to convince sceptics of the value of C4D and to mobilise resources.

Overall conclusions from the evaluation

UNICEF’s efforts to build internal C4D capacity have been largely successful. Through a range of initiatives, UNICEF has created a cadre of professional staff that have the knowledge and skills in C4D to support and advise others in the organisation and externally. The extent to which improved capacity has led to greater integration of C4D at all levels within UNICEF, and in turn improved the quality of C4D implementation, is mixed.

The evaluability of C4D at the level of country programme results frameworks is low, that is, it would be very difficult to evaluate the contribution of C4D initiatives and strategies to the results of the country programme as a whole. This is because the positioning of C4D results in the results frameworks is often unclear and the monitoring data that is collected on behaviour change, social norms change and/or social mobilisation is of poor quality.
The way forward

From the user’s perspective in UNICEF, the evaluation provides much needed and timely learning and recommendations for further strengthening C4D capacity, programming and partnerships. Many of the evaluation recommendations reinforce key components of the “C4D Strengthening Initiative” recently endorsed by UNICEF’s Executive Director. Implementation of several other recommendations has begun or is being considered for a 2017 or 2018 start.

First and foremost, the evaluation has created momentum for reinstating C4D as a core implementation (How) strategy in UNICEF’s upcoming strategic plan 2018-2021. Second, the evaluation results have sparked efforts to tailor C4D training courses to key internal audiences (programme staff, deputy representatives, country representatives, senior management) and to adapt them to specific themes (e.g. Disease Outbreak Communication Course). Third, in response to the evaluation, guidance for optimal integration of C4D into M&E frameworks and plans, reporting and budgeting will be produced and C4D indicators will be integrated into the mandatory corporate reporting tool. And fourth, evidence reviews, case studies and research briefs will be published to showcase C4D evidence and lessons learned across different programme areas.

All in all, the utility of the present evaluation is widely acknowledged to go beyond its recommendations. Findings and insights on topics such as C4D management structures, complementarity with UNICEF external communication and assessment of quality C4D implementation are informing decisions on prioritization and investments on C4D as the organization moves into its next strategic plan cycle.

### Key recommendations to UNICEF and its partners

- Expand the understanding of, and secure more support for C4D as an organizational strategy among a wider range of staff at HQ, RO and CO levels.
- To strengthen institutionalisation, give C4D a higher profile as an implementation strategy in the next Strategic Plan 2018-2021 and require country offices to better integrate C4D into strategic planning, reporting and budgeting processes and ensure C4D has a sustainable funding base.
- Develop an internal strategy to engage with senior managers at all levels of the organization and support them in understanding the value of C4D.
- Consider offering a combination of both general C4D and sector specific courses and support.
- Review and/or strengthen C4D staffing and strategy at regional and country office levels for more systematic integration of C4D in country programmes.
- Renew the focus on designing and delivering quality C4D interventions.
- Strengthen monitoring, evaluation and learning on C4D by investing additional funds, documenting good practices, and preparing high-quality M&E frameworks.