



What is the Impact Evaluation Catalyst Fund?

Over the next four years the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) will invest millions of dollars to accelerate outcomes for children that have fallen off-track owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. UNICEF will try many new innovative solutions to persistent social problems. No social solution is perfect from the outset. Early assessment of *what works, why, for whom and at what cost* through rigorous evaluative evidence can avoid wasting years of human effort and inefficient spending on interventions that do not work. The Impact Catalyst Fund (‘ICF’) is a strategic initiative of the UNICEF Evaluation Office which aims to support high-quality impact evaluations in priority thematic areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025. By emphasizing the critical role of evaluation in guiding future programmatic investments, the ICF will help UNICEF programmes to allocate limited public resources to the greatest need and at the lowest cost.

Impact evaluation (IE) aims to empirically establish attribution by quantifying causal links between the intervention and outcomes of interest, typically at the targeted beneficiary level. It does so by establishing a counterfactual scenario which allows us to see what would happen in the absence of the intervention or exposure to it, thus allowing a critical judgement on whether the intervention makes a difference and to what extent. It can serve both formative and summative purposes and respond equally to learning and accountability needs. If properly aligned with the programme planning stage, it allows valuable feedback to programme design and theory of change.

The ICF aims to achieve the following overarching objectives:

- **Fill knowledge gaps** by expanding a rigorous evaluative evidence base on outcomes and impacts in a strategic, methodologically coherent way under a priority thematic ‘window’ of UNICEF work.
- **Improve programmatic effectiveness and allocative efficiency** by incentivizing the use of rigorous scientific methods of test programme theory in a variety of contexts.
- **Strengthen institutional and national capacity** by integrating evaluative thinking, requirements, and credible processes from the onset of the programme planning process.

Evidence generated with ICF support will strengthen UNICEF advocacy and contribute to further innovation and global learning for children.

Rationale for more rigorous impact evidence on child marriage and other harmful practices

Globally, more than **half a billion girls and women alive today were married in childhood**¹. The highest rates of child marriage are found in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where 34 per cent and 28 per cent of young women, respectively, were married in childhood. **Other harmful practices such as FGM remain highly prevalent in a number of countries** from the Atlantic coast to the Horn of Africa, in areas of the Middle East (e.g., Iraq, Yemen) and some countries of Asia such as Indonesia. The practice is above 90 per cent in Somalia, Guinea, and Djibouti. There is a global knowledge gap on the impact of programming to address harmful practices and social norms affecting opportunities for girls in education, health, and other aspects of their lives.

UNICEF's efforts evoke change in social norms associated with harmful practices at the global, regional, and national levels directly contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), Target 5.3.

The Global Programme to End Child Marriage (GPECM), a 15-year joint programme led and implemented by UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) over the period 2016–2030, has been instrumental for this agenda.



Now in GPECM Phase II (2020–2023), the aim is to accelerate actions to end child marriage by enhancing scalable investments, including strengthening systems, mobilizing communities, and empowering girls, as well as improving data and evidence on what works. The evaluation of the GPECM conducted in 2019 indicated that while the programme seems to be on track to achieve its objectives and is valued for its unique contributions to normative frameworks and multi-sectoral collaboration, there need to be additional efforts in measuring and documenting the results.² Learning about the effectiveness of the most promising and potentially transformative interventions through rigorous impact evaluations in countries covered by GPECM and beyond will catalyse UNICEF programmatic efforts through more focused future investments and stronger policy influence.

To assess opportunities and limitations for generating impact-level evidence in the GPECM, the Evaluation Offices of UNICEF and UNFPA conducted an Impact Feasibility Assessment (IFA) in 2022.



The IFA assessed the ongoing or planned GPECM interventions to identify cases where rigorous impact evaluation is feasible and where such evidence has high potential for policy utilization. Based on a set of selection criteria, the IFA identified four country cases and outlined detailed impact evaluation (IE) plans for their interventions (Bangladesh, Ghana, Niger and Zambia). Inspired by the IFA results, the ICF encourages countries already identified and others (outside GPECM) to apply to this ICF Call for Proposals. Applications will be considered based on the criteria described below. In this vein, countries which are not formally included into GPECM have equal chances to be considered for the ICF funding.



Target 5.3

Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

Objectives of this ICF Call for Proposals

Meeting the ICF mandate to match rigorous impact evidence on UNICEF-led interventions with more efficient resource allocation decisions and national, regional and global learning, this call has the following primary objectives:



Objective 1

Allow UNICEF COs and national partners to make scientifically grounded decisions to scale up 'high gain', transformative interventions to reduce child marriage and eliminate harmful practices in the 'Decade of Action'.



Objective 2

Solidify the institutional and global evidence base on child marriage and other harmful practices through a methodologically harmonized and strategically selected portfolio of rigorous impact evaluations.



Objective 3

Stimulate longer-term planning of impact evaluations (c. 4–5 years) and better alignment of programmatic and evaluative objectives for the most innovative approaches and models.



Objective 4

Strengthen national capacity in impact evaluations through collaborations with national experts and partnerships with academic institutions.

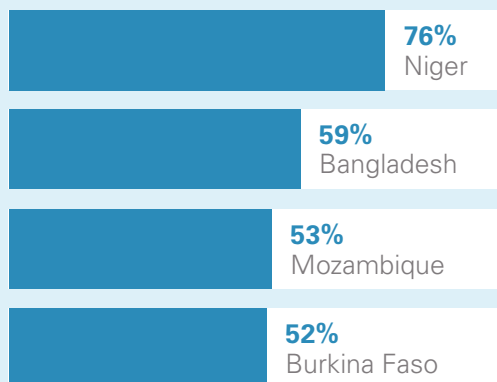
What does ICF 2023 offer to UNICEF COs?

ICF 2023 will provide matching grants of up to \$400,000 to support the design and primary data collection (at least two rounds) for rigorous impact evaluations (preferably randomized controlled trial (RCT) design). The size of the matching financial support will be determined on a case by case basis taking into account the national and programme conditions, local capacity and specific design requirements. With the increasing use of alternative and complementary data collection modalities, such as phone surveys or administrative data, we expect some supported impact evaluations to receive matching grants below this maximum amount. Each selected IE project will also receive expert advice and dedicated technical support throughout the duration of the IE (e.g., on formulating measurable outcomes and evaluation questions, developing feasible evaluation designs, sampling calculations, instruments, selection of qualified evaluators and/or implementing academic partners, etc.). It is expected that up to four impact evaluations will be supported through the ICF 2023 Call for Proposals.

Which interventions and programmes are eligible for the ICF 2023 Call for Proposals

The current Call for Proposals invites UNICEF country offices (COs) to submit a proposal to conduct a rigorous impact evaluation for the planned or ongoing programme/intervention. The ICF 2023 Call for Proposals is open to any UNICEF country offices with relevant programmatic priorities. Based on the Impact Feasibility Assessment in 2022 and identified evidence gaps in this thematic area, the following 'higher gain' geographical and programmatic approaches will be prioritized under the 2023 ICF Call for Proposals:

>50% prevalence of child marriage



Geographical coverage

- Countries with 'high-burden' status (>50% prevalence of child marriage (e.g., Niger (76%), Bangladesh (59%), Mozambique (53%), Burkina Faso (52%)) and West and Central African countries
- Geographic hot spots (including cross border) and highly vulnerable populations (e.g., rural, high poverty, low education – where there is some evidence of child marriage increasing).
- Fragile and humanitarian settings (e.g., post disaster or climate shocks, in the Sahel region or other settings – or among refugee and displaced populations) with application of non-traditional or innovative models to influence social norms.



Programmatic coverage

- Interventions that focus on learning, achievement and perceived post-school options including labour market interventions.
- Girl-level empowerment programmes which are able to 'unbundle' a specific component of programmes.
- Interventions that evaluate a key influencer's role in norm change (e.g., religious leaders, role models).
- Interventions that incorporate and evaluate men and boys' role in norm change.
- Edutainment, radio, social media with targeted audiences (highly scalable and cost-effective).
- Health and protection services taking a systems-level approach with explicit child marriage objectives.
- Diverse forms of family economic support plus gender norm change components

UNICEF COs can apply for an ICF grant with interventions and programmes planned or implemented jointly with other UN agencies or national or international NGOs. In such cases, the UNICEF CO remains the grant recipient accountable for meeting the implementation and quality assurance requirements set out below. It has to ensure, however, that key implementing partners are involved in the governance and technical process through mechanisms specified by the UNICEF Evaluation Policy 2018.

Selection

The selection panel consisting of UNICEF HQ and independent impact evaluation experts will apply the following criteria to select the best impact evaluation proposals:

- Relevance to 'high gains' programmatic and geographical priorities described above.
- Scale and scalability of programming – potential for large sample sizes and maturity of programming.
- Potential for utilization of evidence – plans for future programme expansion 2023–2024 and beyond. Demonstrated demand for and/or interest in rigorous evidence from national counterparts and a wider range of stakeholders.
- Technical feasibility for the use of rigorous causal analysis through a counterfactual design (e.g., RCT or quasi-experimental methods) and potential for methodological innovation.
- Extent to which ethical standards can be met.
- Senior management commitment and available co-funding for the IE.

All selected proposals must meet a number of requirements:

- ① **CO Management**
Country office assigns an IE manager and programme focal point who will work collaboratively from the onset of the project to dissemination of results.
- ② **National ownership**
Key national counterparts are consulted and informed on the technical aspects of the IE project throughout its implementation through participation in the technical reference group and other established mechanisms.
- ③ **National capacity**
CO identifies national academic experts and national data collection companies that are partnered with the IE implementing partner.
- ④ **Inclusion into the CO Costed Evaluation Plan (CEP)**
If not already included, the selected project can be added into the ongoing CEP in addition to already planned activities.
- ⑤ **Quality Assurance**
IE project will have to conform with the UNICEF Evaluation quality assurance standards (GEROS) and all products submitted to internal database EISI in due course.
- ⑥ **Data access**
Raw data and all supplementary files should be archived under the UNICEF open access policy.
- ⑦ **Ethics**
Evaluation and programme focal points must complete the mandatory UNICEF course on Ethics for Evidence Generation. IE design and data collection protocol should get approval from either a local/national research ethics board or UNICEF LTA ethics clearance companies.
- ⑧ **Dissemination and utilization**
A comprehensive dissemination plan must be developed and include policy advocacy and sharing knowledge through a community of practice at the national, regional and global levels. All evaluation subjects should learn about the results of the impact evaluation in language and format accessible to them.



How to apply

All applications should be submitted using a **provided template** outlining programme modalities, and the purpose and expected use of impact evidence in the national policy process and organizational decision-making. Endorsed by the CO Representative, the application must indicate the CO planned allocation of funds for the IE. The proposal will be a starting point for further communication with the programme and evaluation staff at the country and regional levels as a part of the 'impact feasibility scoping' process³ to verify programme timeline and other parameters. While responsibility for submission will lie with the CO team, regional evaluation teams are encouraged to discuss and technically support the COs in their submission.

All proposals should be sent to icfhelp@unicef.org with the deadline of 30 April 2023.

A more detailed timeline is presented below.

Timeline

BY APRIL 30TH

Proposals should be sent to icfhelp@unicef.org and will be considered on a rolling basis.

BY MAY 31ST

All shortlisted proposals will be contacted by the ICF team and regional evaluation focal point to collect additional information and clarifications.

BY JUNE 30TH

All COs receive notifications of final decisions. The selected proposal and CO teams will begin a formal inception process to refine the design, project timeline and budgets.

Notes

¹ UNICEF, *Towards Ending Child Marriage. Global Trends and Profiles of Progress*, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, October 2021, 2021.

² United Nations Population Fund and United Nations Children's Fund, *UNFPA–UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage: Joint evaluation report*, UNFPA and UNICEF, New York, May 2019.

³ With the exception of countries which have already gone through a Global Impact Feasibility Assessment (IFA) on child marriage in 2022, including Bangladesh, Ghana, Niger and Zambia.

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