



@UNICEF/UN0430097/Prinsloo

What is the Impact Evaluation Catalyst Fund (ICF)?

Over the next four years the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) will invest millions of dollars to accelerate outcomes for children who have fallen off track owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, testing 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 save years of human effort and avoid inefficient spending on interventions that do not work. The Impact Evaluation Catalyst Fund is a strategic initiative of the UNICEF Evaluation Office that aims to support high-quality impact evaluations (IEs) 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 needs and at the lowest cost.

Impact evaluation 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 that 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 adaptive social protection (ASP) in fragile context

Adaptive or shock responsive social protection aims to strengthen the ability of social protection systems to help children and their families to: a) prevent shocks transitioning into crises (preparedness and anticipatory action); b) overcome the effects of stresses and covariate shocks (coping); c) support recovery and contribute to resilience building (adaptation). In other words, an ASP can play an essential role in helping children and their families better prepare for, cope with and adapt to the effects of stressors and shocks. It does so by bringing the social protection, disaster risk management (DRM), and climate change adaptation sectors together (Bowen et al. 2020). Hereafter we will refer to 'adaptive social protection' as a broad term that encompasses both interlinked objectives – making the systems more responsive and ultimately achieving better well-being and resilience outcomes.

Fragile and conflict-affected states present a particularly challenging environment for the implementation of sustained ASP. These settings are often characterized by acute poverty and high vulnerability to covariate shocks, nascent social protection systems with limited coverage and comprehensiveness of support, weak infrastructure, low institutional capacity and weak social cohesion, with a need for conflict management but low trust in the state, which heightens the vulnerability to shocks among the population.¹ In 2022, 274 million people needed humanitarian assistance, compared with 167.7 million in 2021. Driven by climate change, there were 43.1 million internal displacements of children over the last 6 years,² and an estimated 216 million people may be internally displaced by 2050.³ More than 1 per cent of the world's population is currently displaced, with children comprising 40 per cent of the displaced population.⁴ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a multidimensional fragility framework that maps 60 fragile and 15 highly fragile contexts against six domains: economic, environmental, human, political, security and societal.

people needing humanitarian assistance

274 million

2022

167.7 million

2021



Target 1.2

By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions

UNICEF is committed to reducing monetary and multidimensional child poverty (Sustainable Development Goal 1, Target 1.2) and accordingly, the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 posits adaptive or shock-responsive social protection as a critical programme accelerator under Goal Area 5. Between now and 2025, UNICEF will sharpen the focus of its work on ASP, with efforts to include:

- accelerating efforts on strengthening adaptive social protection systems and building nascent systems where they do not exist;
- investing in identifying gaps/bottlenecks in social protection systems so that women, men, boys and girls can access social protection when they need it the most and their resilience is built for future crises;
- increasing emphasis on accountability for results, efficiency of processes and coordination.

To this end, strengthening rigorous evaluative evidence on 'what works' for child outcomes and family resilience can ensure the programme's ongoing improvement and learning to achieve tangible results for children at scale by the end of this quadrennial.

Objectives of this ICF call

Under the five-year evaluation partnership between Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and UNICEF, and in line with the ICF mandate to strengthen UNICEF advocacy and contribute to development effectiveness, further innovation and global learning for children, the ICF Call on ASP has the following primary objectives:



Objective 1

Generate rigorous evidence that enables national partners to make scientifically grounded decisions to build and strengthen ASP systems and replicate successful and cost-effective ASP interventions that work and improve child-focused outcomes in fragile contexts.



Objective 2

Contribute to the institutional practice and global evidence base on the effectiveness of ASP (e.g., cash and cash plus) interventions in fragile contexts.



Objective 3

Stimulate better alignment of evaluative learning accountability objectives to programmatic learning needs on the most innovative ASP approaches and models.



Objective 4

Strengthen national capacity in impact evaluations through collaborations with national experts and partnerships with academic institutions, provided that a positive enabling environment exists.

What does the ICF Call on Adaptive Social Protection offer to UNICEF country offices (COs)?

The ICF Call on ASP will provide full technical assistance and matching grants to support design of and primary data collection (at least two rounds) for rigorous impact evaluations (e.g., randomized controlled trial design). The size of the matching financial support will be determined on a case-by-case basis considering national and programme conditions, local capacity and specific evaluation design requirements. The UNICEF Evaluation Office partners with UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Insight and Foresight to jointly implement the selected IEs. This will include full support to CO in formulating measurable outcomes and evaluation questions, developing feasible evaluation designs, sampling calculations, survey instruments, selection of qualified national academic partners, and write-up of the baseline and endline evaluation reports. National experts can be invited as co-PIs provided certain conditions and requirements are met. Selected COs are responsible for contracting a data collection company and overall coordination between ICF technical team, national counterparts and all other stakeholders. It is expected that up to four IEs will be supported through the ASP thematic call.

Which interventions and programmes are eligible for the ICF Call on Adaptive Social Protection?

The current call for proposals invites UNICEF COs to submit an application to conduct a rigorous impact evaluation⁵ for the planned or ongoing ASP programme/intervention. The ICF Call on ASP is open to any UNICEF COs with relevant programmatic priorities operating in fragile contexts according to the [OECD multidimensional fragility framework](#) (see Annex A for full list).

The proposed ASP intervention/ intervention package should include one of the adaptive programme elements such as:

- adjusted targeting approaches to integrate covariate shock risk and household/individual vulnerability (e.g. gender, disability) into eligibility criteria and beneficiary selection, fine-tuning benefits and services to enhance resilience-building outcomes among selected households;
- incorporated design elements to support preparedness, such as disseminating risk information within at-risk communities and promoting increased savings and financial inclusion among beneficiary households; and
- incorporated shock-responsive capacity through design tweaks, vertical or horizontal expansions, and supporting the use of piggybacking shock responses on already existing programs.

Based on the ongoing synthesis of literature examining what works in ASP for child outcomes in humanitarian and fragile contexts, led by the Evaluation Office in 2023, and previously identified evidence gaps in this thematic area, the following ‘higher gain’ geographical and programmatic aspects will be prioritized under this call:



Priorities in geographical coverage:

- Countries with ‘severe’ or ‘high’ environmental fragility status (countries with recurring severe shocks related to climate change in the form of droughts, floods or other extreme weather events).
- Geographic hot spots prone to climate change disasters layered over other elements of fragility with highly vulnerable populations including refugee and displaced populations (e.g., Horn of Africa).



Priorities in programmatic coverage:

- Well-defined (as per theory of change) intervention packages that might combine cash with complementary services and information. This can also include interventions that can potentially ‘unbundle’ a specific component of programmes.
- Programme objectives aimed at change in children and adolescents’ well-being outcomes, including mental health and learning/cognitive development.
- Gender-transformative programming as well as focus on disability, migration/displacement and ethnicity.
- Sustainable programming – interventions are embedded in the government structures; their sustainability is secured through local partnerships and cross-sectorial integration.

All planned IEs will need to have a ‘nested’ design structure that must include a process evaluation component and cost-effectiveness analysis. In the application form, UNICEF COs should indicate implementation-related questions of interest and availability of data on programme costs collected by them or their implementing partners.

UNICEF COs can apply for an ICF grant with interventions and programmes planned or implemented jointly with other United Nations agencies or national or international non-governmental organizations.

Selection

The selection panel consisting of UNICEF staff and independent IE experts will apply the following criteria to select the best IE proposals:

Programmatic relevance

- Matching 'high gains' programmatic and geographical priorities described above
- Scale and scalability of programming – maturity of programming⁶ and potential for large sample sizes
- Potential for utilization of evidence – plans for programme expansion in 2023–2024 and beyond. Demonstrated demand for and/or interest in rigorous evidence from national counterparts and a wider range of stakeholders

Technical feasibility

- Technical feasibility for the use of rigorous causal analysis through a counterfactual design (e.g., randomized controlled trials)
- Potential for methodological innovation
- Extent to which ethical standards can be met

Operational feasibility

- Senior management commitment and available co-funding for the IE
- Low security risks and accessibility
- Low or manageable level of uncertainty about programme implementation
- National capacity for quality data collection and expert contribution.

All selected proposals must meet a number of requirements:

- 1 Country office management**
Country office assigns an evaluation 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 in the CO costed evaluation plan (CEP)**
If not already included, the selected evaluation project can be added into the ongoing CEP in addition to already planned activities.
- 5 Quality assurance**
IE project will have to conform with 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 and comply with ethical codes for data protection.
- 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 long-term agreement ethics clearance companies.
- 8 Dissemination and utilization**
A comprehensive dissemination plan must be developed and include policy advocacy and knowledge sharing through a community of practice at the national, regional and global levels. All evaluation subjects should learn about the results of the IE in a language and format accessible to them.

How to apply

If a CO applies for an ICF grant for a joint programme or intervention, the UNICEF CO remains the grant recipient accountable for meeting the implementation and quality assurance requirements set out below. It must ensure, however, that key implementing partners are involved in the governance and technical process through mechanisms specified by the [UNICEF Evaluation Policy 2023](#).

All applications should be submitted **using the provided application 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's planned allocation of funds for the IE, which will be counted towards the 1 per cent of mandatory spending on evaluation. 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 process to verify programme timeline and other parameters. While responsibility for submission will lie with the CO team, regional evaluation teams, in collaboration with the regional social policy teams, are encouraged to discuss and technically support the COs in their submission.

All proposals should be sent to iecfeval@unicef.org by 15 January 2024.

A more detailed timeline is presented below.

Timeline 2023

BY 19 JANUARY 2024

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

BY 15 FEBRUARY 2024

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

BY 15 MARCH 2024

All COs will 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 Ovadiya, Mirey; Kryeziu, Adea; Masood, Syeda; Zapatero Larrío, Eric (2015). Social protection in fragile and conflict-affected countries: trends and challenges (English). Social protection and labor discussion paper, no. 1502 Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.
- 2 UNICEF, 2023, *Children Displaced in a Changing Climate: Preparing for a future already underway*, UNICEF, New York, 2023, [https://www.unicef.org/media/145951/file/Climate%20displacement%20report%20\(English\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/145951/file/Climate%20displacement%20report%20(English).pdf).
- 3 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2022*, OCHA, Geneva, 2021.
- 4 <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>
- 5 By "rigorous" we mean including a credible counterfactual component to examine attribution to the program result and establish causality.
- 6 The maturity of the programme refers to the implementation conditions in which delivery of the intervention has been tested (albeit on a small scale) and operationalized (e.g., existence of operational manuals, implementation guidelines, etc.).

Annex A: OECD multidimensional fragility framework

