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Evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025

Summary[**]

Summary

In a world of increasing uncertainty for children, coupled with the reversal of already stalled progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals resulting from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, it is crucial that UNICEF be optimally positioned to regain momentum, accelerate progress, and contribute to the achievement of results for children in the best possible ways in the years ahead. Towards this end, the organization, in its Strategic Plan 2022–2025, articulated a set of goals of unprecedented ambition. Towards this end, the Strategic Plan also identified an equally ambitious set of change strategies, enablers and other actions that will be crucial for maximizing the likelihood that it succeeds in achieving its ambitions and, by extension, in contributing to positive impact on the rights of every child, everywhere, in the best possible ways.

Ambitious action intrinsically embodies potential risk. For this reason, the evaluation function has developed a suite of evaluative exercises to help the organization foresee and manage these risks as early as possible. This forward-looking lens was the objective of the "Evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the goals of the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025". Commissioned in the first year of the Strategic Plan, it sought to identify points of institutional strength and areas that require course adjustment. In this way it sought to identify issues before these might become more challenging problems for UNICEF and its partners and other key stakeholders (including the Executive Board) to resolve later on in the quadrennium.

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The evaluation centred on the 19 enablers, change strategies and cross-cutting programmes of the Strategic Plan. Labelled the "strategic elements", they are designed to assure programming success in conjunction with the five Goal Area programmes. Their readiness was assessed by examining their approach, positioning, resources, technical capacity and partnerships. Six of the 19 strategic elements were rated as sufficiently ready, three as insufficient, and ten as nascent (improving) but not yet sufficient. The organization was assessed to be strongest on the "approach" criterion and weakest on the "resources" criterion. Given the high level of ambition targeted in the Strategic Plan, this overarching result is considered to be relatively positive. The more technical evaluability assessment shows sufficient readiness for evaluation at the end of the quadrennium, as well as many readiness issues requiring improvement if the organization is to learn and adjust throughout the quadrennium.

Acknowledging the reality that the Strategic Plan does not cover every element affecting the work of UNICEF, and that individual enablers and change strategies do not unfold in a fragmented manner but rather are closely interlinked and mutually interdependent, the exercise also explored broader underlying organizational readiness issues. In doing so, it identified a set of foundational factors affecting readiness, namely: long-standing organizational strengths; the understanding of and commitment to the Strategic Plan; the suitability of the UNICEF business model; resourcing; and culture and leadership. Each of these factors has several components.

The exercise also identifies 12 critical recommendations to improve readiness and thus maximize the likelihood that UNICEF will achieve its ambitious goals and measure its progress.

Elements of a draft decision for consideration by the Executive Board are provided in section VI.

I. Introduction

A. The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025

1. The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 is a medium-term framework guiding the organization's implementation of its mandate during the current quadrennium. Endorsed by the Executive Board in September 2021 and commenced in January 2022, it aligns UNICEF with the United Nations development system's unified efforts to scale up progress to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. Taking a two-cycle approach for the first time, the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 is an intentional precursor to the 2026–2030 sequel that will further target the goals of the 2030 Agenda in ways that are commensurate with the state of children's rights and with the organization's operating environment at that time.

2. The current Strategic Plan renews the emphasis on historical areas of programming strength while innovating and expanding UNICEF efforts into new areas. Much of this new effort resides in a set of change strategies, enablers and cross-cutting programmes, which are collectively referred to in the present report as the "strategic elements". UNICEF sees the strategic elements as critical to its success in achieving the Strategic Plan goals, as confirmed by their incorporation into the Plan's Integrated Results and Resources Framework (IRRF). Figure I illustrates how the strategic elements are designed to propel the medium- and long-term results of the Strategic Plan.

Figure I
UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025: renewed ambition towards 2030
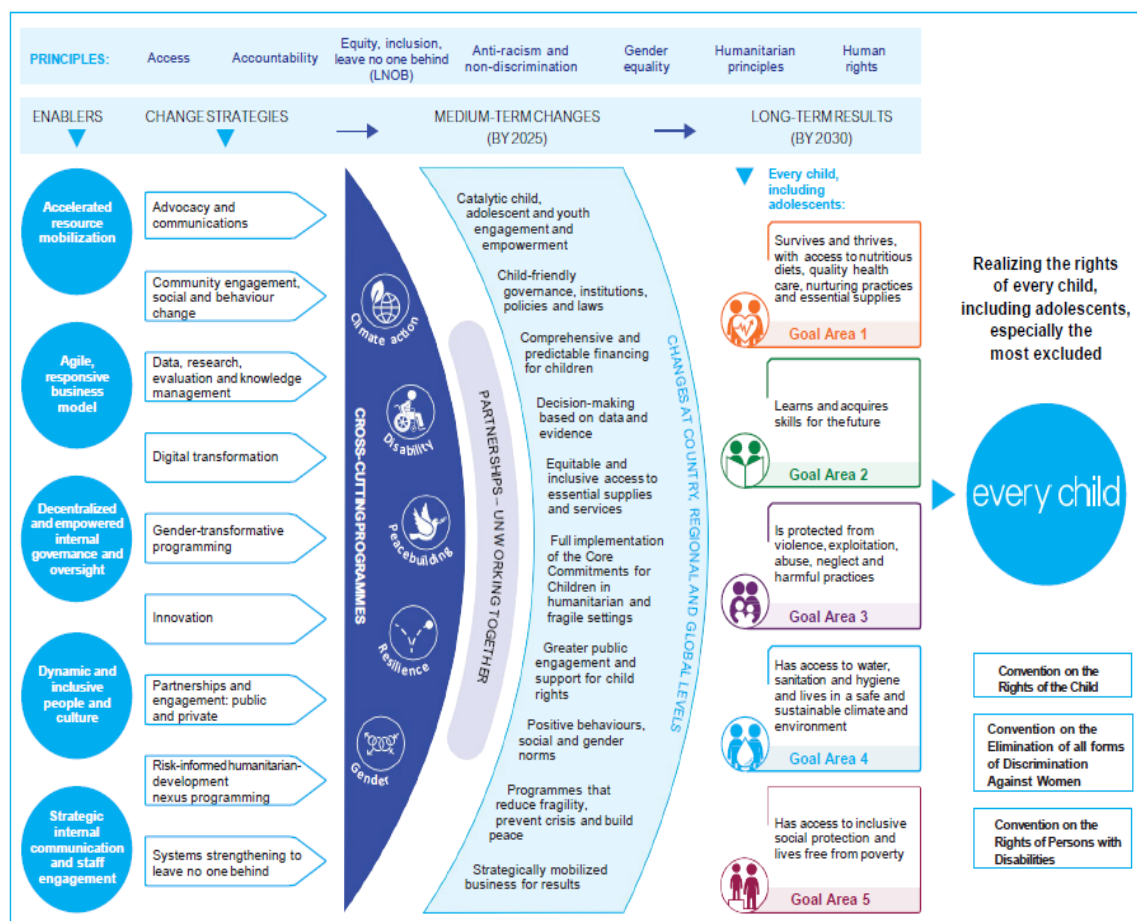
B. Purpose, objectives, scope and intended users

3. The "Evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025" (hereinafter referred to as the evaluation)[1] is anchored in one main overarching question: *"To what extent does UNICEF have the most critical technical and strategic elements in place to achieve the goals it has committed to in the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 and to meaningfully monitor and evaluate its progress against these goals?"*

4. At the broad institutional level, the goals of the evaluation are far-reaching in scope and strategic in implication. The high level of ambition embodied in the Strategic Plan entails a risk of under-fulfilment in the event that the strategic elements do not perform as needed. Towards this end, the Evaluation Office proactively commissioned this evaluation at the early stage of the Strategic Plan's implementation.

5. To meet these goals, the evaluation had two core objectives:

(a) Assess how well-placed UNICEF is to measure progress on the Strategic Plan by looking at the readiness of the collective set of technical elements (for example, theory of change, clarity of objectives, results-based management (RBM) systems, key performance indicators, monitoring and evaluation systems, and use of evidence). The evaluability assessment portion of the evaluation addressed this objective.

(b) Appraise the state of readiness of the strategic elements of the Strategic Plan (that is, the five enablers, nine change strategies and five cross-cutting programmes). The formative evaluation portion of the evaluation addressed this objective.

6. The evaluation analyses the global, regional and country levels of the organization. While each business unit could respond at the global and regional levels, UNICEF country offices are too numerous for complete coverage. Consequently, eight country offices with contrasting locations, national income levels, emergency contexts and other variables were analysed in depth.[2] However, the global survey described below was open to staff from all country offices.

7. While the core consists of the strategic and technical elements, the evaluation necessarily expands the focus in three ways:

(a) It considers the strategic and technical elements' linkages to the Goal Areas that are the vehicles of much of the Strategic Plan action.

(b) It employs three deep-dive topics as case studies. Each one is important for reaching Strategic Plan goals while reflecting the interplay of the strategic and technical elements:

  i. **Organizational convergence:** Bringing together the various pillars of the organization and its partners to work in a multiplicative way.

  ii. **Organizational culture:** Ways of working, mindset and leadership, and change management.

  iii. **Readiness to anticipate and respond to global shocks:** Designing organizational capacity to anticipate and respond to multidimensional repercussions of global shocks.

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[1] The report is available on the Evaluation Office website at www.unicef.org/evaluation/reports#/.
[2] Angola, China, Fiji, India and Kosovo [as understood in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999)], Syrian Arab Republic, Türkiye, Zimbabwe.

(c)   It includes a set of foundational factors of organizational performance that partly overlap with the strategic elements but have an identity as underlying or transversal levers available to managers to effect change. These are: organizational culture, structural governance and arrangements, accountability frameworks, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and funding adequacy and predictability.

II.   Methodology

A.   Data collection

8.   Over 400 documents were reviewed to analyse alignment with the new Strategic Plan and identify the direction that UNICEF should take. Focus group discussions ascertained the plan for implementation, challenges and supporting factors, links with other elements and the five Goal Areas, and progress thus far. Key informant interviews were held with staff and partners across each level, each case study country, each strategic element, and all Goal Areas. A global survey distributed to UNICEF staff explored perspectives on the Strategic Plan, on each strategic and technical element with which they claimed familiarity, and on the deep-dive subjects.

9.   The evaluation team consulted with UNICEF leadership via workshops at critical decision-making moments. A reference group with members from across the organization was convened at the design stage and when early findings were available. Four validation workshops were held with strategic and technical element leads so that they could assess the soundness of the analysis, react to the draft findings, and advise on the way forward. Two similar workshops were held with members of the Global Evaluation Committee, and additional validation workshops were organized with leadership.

Figure II
Snapshot of data collection and analysis approach
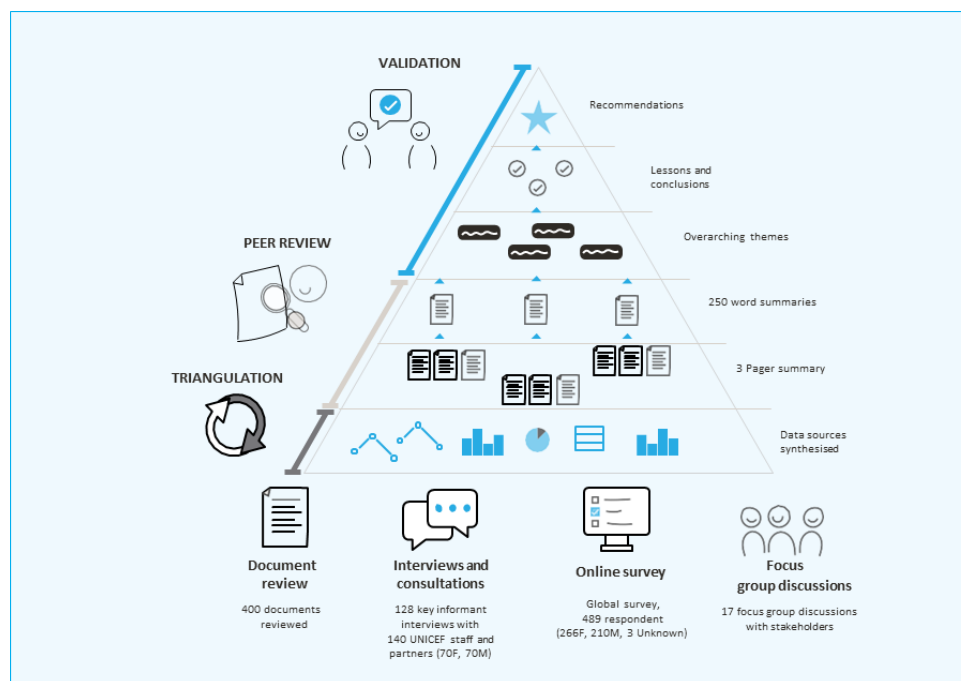
B. Analytical frameworks

10.   The evaluation achieved consistency in analysis through a three-part approach. The first was a readiness assessment framework (table 1) applied across the strategic elements.

Table 1
Dimensions and definitions of the readiness assessment framework

Approach	Positioning	Technical capacities	Resources	Partnerships
Refers to the design and means used to execute the change strategy/enabler/ cross-cutting programme to plan, implement monitor and learn from it.	Refers to the optimal place the organizational element is/can be to achieve its goals internally, and relative to other organizations that aim to achieve the same/similar outcomes.	Refers to the skills, experience and knowledge of the staff and the organization that allow for key organizational elements to be effective.	Refers to the financial, human and/or knowledge capital underpinning key organizational elements for timely and optimal delivery against the desired objectives.	Refers to voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties that work together to achieve a common purpose, having agreed to share responsibilities, resources, risks and benefits.

11.   The second was an evaluability framework applied across the technical elements (table 5) to assess how UNICEF is set to measure the Strategic Plan progress delivered. The factors examined were coherence, fitness for purpose, and resourcing.

12.   The third was an overall readiness scale (table 2) employed across the strategic and technical elements, based on the evaluation team's judgment considering all of the evidence.

Table 2
Readiness assessment framework scale

Totally lacking/very poor: the element requires immediate adjustment in order to support implementation of the Strategic Plan.	1
Insufficient/poor: the element is insufficiently ready to support implementation of the Strategic Plan.	2
Insufficient, but nascent: the element presents initial but insufficient evidence that shows readiness for supporting the Strategic Plan. It demonstrates contribution to outputs but not yet out-comes.	2
Sufficient/good: the element is ready to support delivery of output results but cannot demonstrate contributions to priority outcomes.	3
Optimal/very good: the element presents a very good amount of evidence that support the implementation of the Strategic Plan with robust evidence towards achievement of outcomes/ medium-term changes.	4

C. Evaluation limitations

13.   The breadth of the terms of reference, coupled with a deliberately early and rapid time frame for the exercise, required a broad rather than deep approach. Consequently, the exercise did not thoroughly examine the Goal Areas under the new Programme Group and therefore lacks specific insights into their capacities to complement or coordinate with the efforts of the strategic and technical elements. In addition, external stakeholders were less well represented than internal stakeholders. However,

the external stakeholders interviews were augmented by key documents from recent reports of the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) and the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit, among others.

III.   Findings

14.   The findings in the present report are drawn directly from the evaluation report. The sequence in which the findings are presented, as well as how they are organized, veers from the evaluation report structure, in order to convey the same information more succinctly.

A.   Overall readiness for the strategic elements

15.   This section summarizes the readiness of the 19 strategic elements, as presented in tables 3 and 4.

Table 3
Readiness assessments of the strategic elements

Presence	Readiness assessment	All	Enablers	Change strategies	Cross-cutting
Fully in place	Optimal/very good	0%	0%	0%	0%
Partially in place	Sufficient/good*	6 [32%]	2 [40%]	3 [33%]	1 [20%]
	Insufficient, but nascent	10 [52%]	3 [60%]	5 [56%]	2 [40%]
	Insufficient/poor	3%	0%	1%	2%
Not in place	Totally lacking/very poor	0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 4
Readiness framework and strategic elements heatmap

Element		APPROACH	POSITIONING	RESOURCES	TECHNICAL CAPACITIES	PARTNERSHIPS	OVERALL
Enabler	Accelerated resource mobilization	3	2	2 →	2	3	3
	Agile and responsive business model	3	2 →	2 →	2 →	2 →	2 →
	Decentralized and empowered internal governance and oversight	3	2	1	2	3	2 →
	Dynamic and inclusive people and culture	3	3	2	3	3	3
	Strategic internal communication and staff engagement	2 →	2	2 →	2 →	3	2 →
Change Strategy	Advocacy and communication	3	2	2	2 →	3	2 →
	Community engagement and social and behavioural change	3	2 →	3	2 →	2 →	2 →
	Data, research, evaluation and knowledge management	2	3	2	3	3	3
	Digital transformation	3	3	2 →	2	2	3
	Gender-transformative programming	3	3	3	2 →	3	3
	Innovation	3	2 →	2 →	2	2	2 →
	Partnership and engagement (public and private)	3	2 →	2	2	2 →	2 →
	Risk-informed humanitarian and development nexus programming	2 →	2 →	1	2	2	2
	System strengthening to leave no one behind	2 →	2	4	3	2	2 →
Cross-Cutting	Climate action	3	2 →	1	2 →	2	2
	Disability	3	2 →	2	2	2	2 →
	Gender	3	3	3	2 →	3	3
	Peacebuilding	3	1	2	2	2	2
	Resilience	2	2 →	2	3	2	2 →

Legend: 1 = Totally lacking/very poor: the element requires immediate adjustment to support the implementation of the Strategic Plan. 2 = Insufficient/poor: the element is insufficiently ready to support the implementation of the Strategic Plan. 2 → = Insufficient, but nascent: the element presents initial but insufficient evidence that shows readiness for supporting the Strategic Plan. It demonstrates a contribution to outputs but not yet outcomes. 3 = Sufficient/good enough: the element is ready to support the delivery of output results but cannot demonstrate contributions to outcomes. 4 = Optimal/very good: the element presents a very good amount of evidence towards achieving outcomes/medium-term changes.

16. The first key finding is that all strategic elements were partially in place, with six being sufficient/good, ten insufficient but nascent, and three inadequate/poor. This is largely positive. These are platforms for growth if the readiness issues identified are addressed. They are preserving the accumulated investments of recent years while acknowledging some weaknesses and the collective challenge of meeting the Strategic Plan.

17. Interesting patterns emerged when looking across all 19 strategic elements. Elements that were new to the current Strategic Plan or were introduced in the most recent Strategic Plan had lower readiness ratings and are thus less ready to achieve their objectives. While this is unsurprising, it also means they need reinforcement, or their expectations need to be moderated.

18.   The cross-cutting elements had the lowest readiness ratings across all data sources, including the staff survey. This reflects a sustained issue with convergence and intersectionality, a theme discussed in section IV below.

19.   Yet, gender had consistently high ratings as a change strategy and cross-cutting programme. In recent years, each of the six highest-rated elements has benefited from support manifested in Executive Board decisions, Executive Director leadership, specialized units and solid internal communications. This represents a formula for success over time.

20.   Turning to the aspects of the readiness framework, the approach – often called the "strategic intent" – was often highly rated owing to clear statements of intent, clear articulation of concepts, and well-developed strategies, policies and guidance. However, weaknesses were found in the coherence with other elements that work towards similar outcomes, and in the monitoring and learning components of several elements.

21.   Positioning is the optimal placement of the element internally and relative to other internal units or partner organizations with the same or similar aims. More than half of the elements are rated as nascent, meaning that they can be fully ready with targeted improvements. Challenges in positioning include operationalizing converging approaches by mapping out accountabilities, developing a common understanding in the case of cross-cutting programmes, and defining comparative advantages of different actors. Convergence – rooted in positioning – is the subject of recommendation 1.

22.   Technical capacity is traditionally strong in many areas but appears less strong than expected by the UNICEF audience. A scoping explanation is that the evaluation did not look within the Goal Areas where tremendous expertise resides, but it reflects the greatly expanded ambition of the Strategic Plan. New agendas were introduced in the Strategic Plan (for example, climate action), and some implementation strategies were redefined or given larger targets (for example, digital transformation, innovation and social and behavioural change), all of which require updated technical skills. A common complication is an uneven distribution of, or access to, the pools of technical talent for example, culture, agile and responsive business model, advocacy and communications).

23.   Within partnerships, the presence of UNICEF, visibility in the field and organizational strength in working with Governments and civil society were reaffirmed. However, too few of those rated insufficient were judged to be nascent. The cross-cutting areas and the innovation and digital transformation areas are especially low rated.

24.   Resourcing was by far the weakest aspect. Three of the four instances when the totally lacking/very poor rating was assigned occur here. The issues are explored in depth later but do not derive from an overall shrinkage or shortage of funds. Instead, the growth in the Strategic Plan ambition, and aspects of the resourcing environment, such as earmarking, are among the significant barriers.

B.   Overall readiness for the technical elements

25.   Evaluability means the extent to which the Strategic Plan is ready to be evaluated in a reliable and credible fashion. It includes both summative evaluability, referring to evaluation after the Strategic Plan concludes, and formative evaluability, referring to the review moments during implementation that can support strategic and operational decision-making. There are seven technical elements within three evaluability assessment clusters, as presented in table 5.

Table 5
Readiness assessments of the technical elements

Category	Item	Description/intent	Rating
Coherence of the Strategic Plan frameworks	Strategic alignment	Strategic Plan objectives should be aligned and compatible with other UNICEF strategies, and processes should exist to align them.	Sufficient/ good
	Applied logic	The underlying logic of the Strategic Plan should be clearly stated and well understood. Theories of change or logic models must also show evidence of consistent and focused use.	Insufficient/ poor
	Sound design	The Strategic Plan, via the Integrated Results and Resources Framework (IRRF), must meet applicable standards for indicators, objectives, etc. There should be no gap between the Strategic Plan's theory of change logic and the IRRF measures.	Insufficient/ poor
"Fit-for- purposeness" of the monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes	Monitoring, evaluation and learning processes	Monitoring, evaluation and learning processes include RBM practices, research and evaluation, and stakeholder participation. They should support timely multi-level monitoring of Strategic Plan progress, especially in Goal Areas.	Sufficient/ good
	Results-based management (RBM) practices	The RBM system should be structured and socialized such that all UNICEF staff bring results to focus on tasks, activities, strategies, programmes and policies. The RBM system must enable Strategic Plan-related monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.	Insufficient/ nascent
	Monitoring, evaluation and learning resources	Strategic Plan-related monitoring, evaluation and learning processes should be adequately resourced, showing concern for efficiency.	Insufficient/ nascent
Strategic Plan evidence usefulness	Results-based budgeting	Results-based budgeting principles and practices support organizational priorities when resource allocations and re-allocations match preferences and demonstrate performance. UNICEF should apply such principles to ensure value for money.	Unable to rate/ insufficient evidence
	Evidence utilization	Decision makers should use Strategic Plan-related evidence at different levels for strategic reflection and periodic operational decisions.	Insufficient/ poor

26.   The second key finding is that UNICEF can be optimistic about the prospects for a high-quality summative evaluation in 2025, but formative evaluability faces important barriers and is not yet fit for purpose.

27.   Despite some critical limitations, the Strategic Plan offers a coherent framework for summative evaluation. The goal and result areas of the Strategic Plan are clear; strategies for programmes, cross-cutting activities and country programmes are broadly aligned and further aligning; and the IRRF supports comprehensive measurement of outputs delivered by UNICEF and changes in outcomes by the end of the Strategic Plan. However, summative evaluability is constrained by the absence of a well-conceived integrated (across Goal Areas) theory of change or logic model applicable to UNICEF at different levels, a lack of clarity about how change strategies are intended to work and deliver medium-term changes, and about the objectives of some cross-cutting systems and programmes.

28.   The evolving Strategic Plan-related monitoring, evaluation and learning processes can be ready to support a summative evaluation. The current process of monitoring, review and consultation can produce the information and evidence needed to evaluate Strategic Plan implementation. The RBM system will provide programme output data aggregable across any period. Current RBM funding, monitoring and evaluation staffing levels, and the revised progress monitoring via the

core strategic indicators approach are all positives. However, it remains likely that research, monitoring and evaluation will be unsystematically deployed and weakly coordinated to generate evidence about Strategic Plan progress. Critical evidence will therefore be lacking about outcomes and systemic changes.

29. The readiness for formative evaluability is harmed by weaknesses in applied logic and approaches to capturing outcomes. The goal and result areas of the Strategic Plan are clear, and the IRRF can capture cumulative achievements compared to baselines and targets, but a lack of clarity about theories of change, change strategies and medium-term changes complicates the ability of UNICEF to learn about their effectiveness and adapt them during implementation. The Strategic Plan offers a high-level theory of change and theories of change for each Goal Area. Nevertheless, there is insufficient understanding of programme theories of change and the role of "medium-term changes" – including the strategic elements – at different levels. Few country programme documents mention theories of change, and their application is considered problematic.

30. The monitoring, evaluation and learning process lacks adequately focused resources for formative evaluation despite considerable effort invested in RBM and continuous engagement by all programme staff. While the new monitoring, evaluation and learning process should be feasible based on core standard indicators and annual reporting, this process is still being rolled out. Too much effort has been absorbed in global reporting mechanisms and internal accountability processes. This has encouraged a cultural impediment in which reporting is undertaken for compliance purposes ahead of feeding into a dynamic review process. It is also perceived that there are too many indicators for efficient management.

31. A more durable issue is that the RBM system needs to sufficiently capture Strategic Plan progress on outcomes in both the Goal Areas and the strategic elements. The Strategic Plan has undertaken a positive shift to increase the focus on outcomes for children, which builds on the long-term institutional strength of UNICEF in social data measurement. However, the IRRF does not sufficiently capture the contributions of UNICEF to outcomes, which hampers summative and formative reviews. Measuring outcomes using existing tools and indicators presents difficulties in the range of subjects, affordability, levels, coverage of all important groups, and timing, since these rely on government data published every few years. The contribution that research, studies, and evaluations can make is undercut by insufficient programme budgets, especially in the smaller offices that prevail in middle- and upper-income settings.

32. Mechanisms are incomplete for using evidence to support decision-making at corporate and country office levels. The Strategic Plan data and analysis delivered to the Executive Board via the annual report of the Executive Director, and its data companion and scorecard, are used to demonstrate the work done more than for decision-making or strategic thinking. Recognizing the need for more senior-level strategic reviews, a headquarters-led process for Strategic Plan-related monitoring, evaluation and learning is introducing a new monitoring approach, a Global Effectiveness Review, and a learning agenda. However, Strategic Plan evidence is not generated in formats that support decision-making at senior management or country office management levels, and mechanisms for using such evidence are currently lacking.

IV. Expanded findings and the way forward

33. The value of this evaluation is in identifying issues that lead to strong or weak readiness and in identifying ways to improve readiness. The analysis showed that the issues affecting individual strategic or technical elements usually arise from

conditions that also affect other areas. These common influences are often located in the foundational factors that the evaluation examined. To convey these powerful influences, the present section is organized around the foundational factors. Achieving compactness and highlighting connections mean the section's organization is different from the main report, but the findings are all consistent and they are linked to the recommendations presented in section V.

34. From another angle, UNICEF managers are interested in identifying how changes can be accomplished. The foundational factors are correlated with managerial structures such as resources and leadership units, giving a tactical sense of the gears that should be engaged. To assist with this envisioning, the recommendations linked to these factors are noted for promoting change.

A.   Fundamental organizational strengths

35.   The evaluation identified a set of ongoing and deep-rooted strengths upon which the Strategic Plan can reliably build.

36.   **Widespread presence and partners' respect:** The extensive offices and sub-offices of UNICEF across the globe, backed by regional offices, global functions/technical hubs and the National Committees for UNICEF, create an infrastructure capable of handling complex commitments such as the Strategic Plan.

37.   **Mission ethos and readiness to confront formidable challenges:** High morale and dedication to the mission emerge in each staff survey and review. This indicates an underlying culture able to motivate staff and partners. It also generates an institutional resilience that makes UNICEF well-positioned for long-lasting, daunting challenges such as climate change and peacekeeping. Strength is most visible in complex emergencies, now a significant part of UNICEF resources and staff deployment. It also inheres to the decades-long commitments to systemically complex issues embedded in the Goal Areas and socially ambitious goals pertaining to gender and disability.

38.   **Systems approaches and widespread partnering:** The broader UNICEF theory of change guides it to work with large-scale systems and subsystems. The Strategic Plan naturally centres on national systems, especially those of government services. It also addresses civic systems such as media, the academic sector and private enterprise, and works in cultural and psychological spaces with its strong communication and social and behavioural change components. UNICEF is prepared to work across the system spectrum from policy approval and implementation to evaluation. This broad understanding and presence opens the path for many kinds of partners to work cooperatively in ways they might not be able to organize without the convening presence of UNICEF.

39.   **Technical capacity:** When UNICEF commits to a programme or a technical domain, it locates and internalizes skills around those areas while accessing the market for support when needed. This has led to robust capacities across the Goal Area sectors, such as education, and complex specializations such as supply, social data and innovation. As not all skills can be omnipresent, there is a model of widespread distribution of core capacities with more specialized pools or hubs supporting a range of offices.

40.   These strengths can become points of vulnerability if not monitored and adapted. A theme noted in the sections that follow is where the Strategic Plan stresses the organization's strengths and how well these are being recognized.

B. Generating understanding of and commitment to the Strategic Plan

41. Each Strategic Plan is a combination of carryover and new priorities. It implies adjusted – often heavier – workloads. It works best when staff understand it and believe it to be a practical guide. This section discusses how well this understanding is developing and where there are readiness concerns.

42. **Familiarity:** Only 14 per cent of the survey respondents reported participating in the Strategic Plan deliberation process in any form. However, 57 per cent stated that they were extremely or moderately familiar with the Plan, based on self-directed reading or participation in internal dissemination events. As expected, interest is highest for those parts that directly relate to the staff member's duties. Given that immediate familiarity is not required for most staff and that country offices will integrate the Strategic Plan content over the following years as they design new country programmes, a low level of direct knowledge is not, per se, worrisome. However, it is problematic if the Strategic Plan implies much more significant or more radical change than is expected or if it occurs faster than change management capacities can handle.

43. **Perception that the Strategic Plan is aspirational:** The level of organizational ambition is high. Staff question whether UNICEF can deliver on everything included in the Plan. More country office-level staff than other staff perceive the Plan as too broad, with too many strategic priorities being globally rolled out. Many staff see the Strategic Plan as aspirational rather than a genuinely achievable plan. This sense emerges among those familiar with it, not just the uninformed. This is a warning sign that the Plan may have a large gap between the present capacities and readiness of UNICEF versus what is needed. It certainly means that internal communication, included within recommendation 5, should prioritize informing staff about the Plan and registering their concerns to determine what actions are required to improve readiness.

44. **Areas where the Strategic Plan fit for mission is questioned:** As noted, many staff familiar with the Strategic Plan consider it aspirational. Many concerns were mentioned when they were asked to identify the gaps between the Strategic Plan commitments and actual readiness. Four concerns that are important owing to their scale and the centrality of their role in the Plan's success are the following:

(a) **Middle-income and high-income countries:** The Strategic Plan is perceived to be designed primarily for low-income contexts with classic service delivery approaches and a central focus on the Goal Areas. Fragile and emergency contexts are strongly present, but the thematic concerns and operational realities in middle-income and upper-income contexts are felt to be underrepresented. Given the number of middle-income and high-income countries where UNICEF works, this scepticism about the Plan's validity covers many of the target populations and country offices.

(b) **Prioritization guidance:** UNICEF has never expected the country offices to define their priorities based only on the prevailing Strategic Plan. Host nation development goals, carry-over programmes (reflecting long-term commitments) and issues realized through the country programme planning expand the set of potential priorities beyond what can be accepted. A disciplined approach to weighing the relative importance is needed. UNICEF staff feel this is presently lacking, especially for the newer elements of the Strategic Plan and in general. The likelihood of lower priority/non-Strategic Plan issues being selected will be higher until the guidance requested in recommendation 4 is provided.

(c) **Climate:** Climate action is a cross-cutting programme, and climate change, disaster risk and environmental degradation are a core part of Goal Area 4. The readiness rating does not reflect the stated commitment, with major issues in resources and partnerships, and an overall insufficient rating. Recommendation 12 calls on UNICEF to clarify its focus on climate action.

(d) **Intersectionality:** Intersectionality is the intentional effort to address multiple constraints or deprivations that will achieve a greater impact than just reducing one vulnerability. For example, a disabled child of a minority group with weak social indicators benefits more from addressing the handicap and the social exclusion together than just one or the other. The Strategic Plan theory of change emphatically states that intersectionality is a critical driver of success in the new Strategic Plan. However, at present, UNICEF is not sufficiently ready at a conceptual, tool, measurement, operational or programme experience level. Achieving that readiness is the aim of recommendation 8.

C. Suitability of the UNICEF business model

45. The UNICEF business model comprises many elements noted as organizational strengths: broad presence, decentralized authority, and a blending of in-house and sourced capacity. That fundamental model is not in doubt. However, the Strategic Plan is establishing new strategic elements that must be accommodated within that structure.

46. **Strengths and weaknesses of silos:** The concept of silos was repeatedly raised by many voices in the exercise as a problem. It refers to the concentration of expertise, role, authority and resources in powerful institutional units, with the sectors comprising the Goal Areas or Programme Group most often cited. Silos are said to command attention that crowds out other needs. Their strong internal capacities are thought to be insufficiently made available in support of new priorities. The result is conservatism in favour of the traditional sectoral goals and lower-income and emergency contexts, and a slowing of the agility promised in the Strategic Plan to raise the impact of newer initiatives.

47. **Competition among business units:** It is perceived that many strategic elements compete for resources and attention from the sectoral teams, senior management, and regional and country offices. Teams in this position are thus spending time seeking attention and support that would be better spent in substantive work to reach the Strategic Plan goals. This arises from a weak resource base and a business model that makes investment in the change strategies and cross-cutting programmes optional by all offices with a programming budget, without sufficient guidance on the contexts in which they must become a priority. It can also arise when closely related business units have overlapping remits, as seen in the peacebuilding-resilience-nexus strategic elements and the staff that deal with evidence generation (data, research, evaluations, knowledge management). Recommendation 3, a high priority, urges UNICEF to reduce this structural competition, and recommendation 7 seeks practical collaboration across the data, research, evaluation and knowledge management change strategy.

48. **Accessing technical support:** The presence of many small UNICEF offices incapable of financing a full-skills complement creates a great demand for technical support in specialized areas. UNICEF possesses numerous internal resource centres – for example, innovation, supply, digital transformation and research. However, it is reported from both the offices and the specialized centres that demand far outstrips supply. Despite many modalities for accessing external expertise, the complexities of organizing that and the cost to the users mean it is a partial solution. This problem will increase as the demand for help with the strategic elements falls upon what are

generally small units. A vivid example is the need for foresight and risk analysis of potentially severe global shocks with enormous social and economic effects, such as the COVID-19, and subsequent preparedness planning. Even if every other issue is resolved, weak access to technical support alone will severely brake on readiness. Improving the flow of knowledge and technical capacity is discussed in recommendation 10, and the need for a systematic approach to global shocks is in recommendation 11.

49. **Convergence:** Convergence is defined as "bringing together various pillars of the organization (vertically, horizontally, functionally) and its partners (external convergence) to work in a multiplicative way/with a multiplier effect". The Strategic Plan makes a clear statement of intent towards catalysing the functional, vertical and horizontal convergence of all parts of the organization via the strategic elements and affiliations across Goal Areas and levels. The deep dive on this theme highlighted the following factors as promoting or constraining the readiness of UNICEF to realize its convergence potential:

(a)   Country programme-level experience has shown the potential to transcend sectoral programming silos. One method is the life-cycle approach, but its comparative effectiveness needs further evaluation. There are also many convergent approaches across the Goal Areas/sectors, such as the multisectoral approach to nutrition.

(b)   It is unclear to staff how the strategic elements underpin the work of Goal Areas and how they can benefit from incorporating them.

(c)   Clarification is needed regarding the intersecting benefits of co-programming across the strategic elements, such as the mutual benefits of co-programming resilience, gender, the nexus and climate action.

(d)   Convergence is harmed when related functions are managed separately, for example, disability, gender, and leave no one behind.

(e)   Managerial and leadership incentivizing of convergence – and willingness to drive it at lower levels – is limited by competition for portfolios, promotions and directorial positions.

(f)   The business model and solid corporate culture of UNICEF hinder partnerships with other United Nations entities or partner organizations; loyalty appears to be a lot stronger to the specific mandate of UNICEF and internal objectives than towards the United Nations common agendas.

50.   Given the centrality of convergence in the Strategic Plan and the issues noted, recommendation 1 points to accelerating programmatic and organizational convergence.

D.   Resourcing

51.   Accelerated resource mobilization is a strategic element, but resourcing more broadly is threaded throughout the Strategic Plan. All elements and programmes strive to raise funds and increase resources. The IRRF operationalizes an approach to resource allocation, and the entire RBM process is designed to spend wisely. Financial risk mitigation and operational efficiency are an accountability of managers. Despite this, the resourcing environment and readiness have significant vulnerabilities.

52.   **Resource mobilization:** This Strategic Plan enabler is rated as sufficiently ready. The partnerships nurtured over time, the National Committee structures, the constant innovation in fundraising approaches to take advantage of new opportunities, and the annual growth in revenue merit a strong endorsement of the resource mobilization apparatus.

53. **Mismatch of income and needs:** Despite the revenue stability and growth, Resources were the least ready aspect of the strategic elements. This primarily reflects flat or declining flexible revenue from donors that prefer to earmark the funds instead. Emergency operations and some programmes and sectors are strongly funded, whereas many cross-cutting functions, newer Strategic Plan priorities, and the work in middle-income and high-income countries are underfinanced.

54. **Absence of a full Strategic Plan costing:** Surprisingly, UNICEF has yet to estimate what is financially needed to meet the Strategic Plan goals. This would require calculating the requirements per Goal Area and a derivative costed analysis of the role that UNICEF will play. Consequently, budget and investment decisions – including in the strategic elements – are not costed.

55. **Allocation concerns:** An organization prefers a combination of flexibility to direct resources to where they are most needed and some rule-based certainty that a portion of needs will be met. In multiple instances, UNICEF tends towards the less desirable option:

(a) The allocation formulas for country programme flexible resources create barriers to moving funds towards middle-income and high-income countries, and towards innovative organization-wide approaches.

(b) The evaluability technical elements review concluded that there is no visible UNICEF approach to results-based budgeting which reallocates from lower-performing programmes to new opportunities or those ready to go to scale. Related to this is the absence of workable "value-for-money" tools.

(c) The "business owners" of large budgets (programmes, country programmes) are rarely obligated to share them with newer priorities. They may opt in but are not required to do so. Combined with small core allocations, this can keep priorities such as disability underfunded and underrepresented.

56. **Organizational efficiencies:** The current approach of UNICEF to efficiency is misaligned with the reality of working in a complex system and actively managing income and influence. This includes a lack of organization-wide historical data on efficiency analyses. While commitments were made in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 to improve organizational efficiency, the 2020 MOPAN assessment concluded that UNICEF fell short of expectations on efficiency. The organization was rated as unsatisfactory in the efficiency of results owing to limited evidence and a lack of means to measure and demonstrate efficiency. No contrary evidence appeared in this evaluation beyond the Headquarters Efficiency Initiative.

57. Recommendation 6 asks UNICEF to address the divergence between the Strategic Plan's financial resources and demand. Recommendation 2 seeks clarified accountabilities for delivering the Strategic Plan, and blending leadership issues and clarity on whose skills and financial resources must be made available.

E. Culture and leadership

58. **Organizational culture:** The positive factors of UNICEF include a strong mission ethos, resilience, and rising to challenges. These are desirable cultural attributes. Further, there is no sense of crisis: 84 per cent of the survey respondents indicated that organizational culture was a positive or very positive factor, although respondents noted that it can be strengthened. Four of the five Strategic Plan enablers target the cultural milieu of UNICEF, as conveyed in the keywords agile, responsive, staff engagement, dynamic, inclusive, decentralized and empowered. Considering the stress-assigned culture by the Strategic Plan architects, it was examined in a deep dive. The collective view is that the readiness to achieve necessary change is low, and that:

(a)   The recent drive to better respect human values and stop abusive behaviour is highly appreciated and is considered well managed. However, some informants worry that managers do not have sufficient support in emphasizing accountability and results for children.

(b)   The value agenda, agility and other aspects of the enablers are essential, but other critical cultural aspects require attention. Neither the Strategic Plan enablers nor different processes intentionally address other pressing needs, such as ways of working, mindset and leadership.

(c)   The silo effect is fed by a highly specialist culture and is an ongoing barrier to convergence.

(d)   Habits of mind and historical practices create a routine approach that is hard to redirect, as with silos and problems with convergence.

(e)   Risk-taking and acceptance of failure are largely absent, with a strong preference for "safe" efforts that yield visible and quantitative results.

(f)   Recognizing and responding to oncoming global shocks requires a mindset to analyse, anticipate and seize opportunities that is often absent.

(g)   The persistence of hierarchical decision-making remains at all levels and is the opposite model and a functional barrier to empowerment, engagement and agility. Hierarchical approaches by Representatives and Deputy Representatives negatively affect the office-wide country office culture.

59.   Culture is not the subject of a specific recommendation. The general context is favourable in the sense that the Strategic Plan designers perceive the gaps between current cultural practices and Strategic Plan requirements, and staff readiness to engage around cultural issues is high. However, it is not clear whether the substantial internal obstacles are understood, the other critical cultural barriers identified by staff are on the Strategic Plan radar, or the change management structures are equipped to address them.

60.   **Change management:** As the ambition of the Strategic Plan is high and the number of adjustments required are large, the change management structures in place to manage this effort need to be sufficiently strategic and well-developed. The primary change management approach of UNICEF is limited to projectized efforts rather than what is termed continuous improvement. The critical structural unit is primarily staffed with staff seconded from other offices on short-term assignments. UNICEF staff feel that existing change management approaches are not sufficiently helping UNICEF to accelerate or pivot as required.

61.   When change requirements are seen to be especially important, UNICEF mainstreams them into existing structures or creates new, small, and discrete units. These approaches sometimes work, as Innovation has done over time, and Culture is presently succeeding, but many structures remain relatively small, weakly financed, and detached from a more powerful central drive to manage change. Their leverage to drive change is also hampered by the absence of clear accountabilities for many Strategic Plan elements, as indicated in the discretion accorded to offices to adopt Strategic Plan priorities. A more coordinated, centrally led and adequately resourced approach is needed, as stated in recommendation 5.

62.   **Leadership:** Many aspects of the Strategic Plan agenda, including major change elements, can be managed through existing processes and structures. Currently, however, the magnitude of the needs of all types are visible. The typical reaction of staff and the lessons of other agencies point to a crucial and highly public leadership role as a precursor to success. Three aspects are cited, including:

(a) The need for sustained leadership modelling of many aspects by the Executive Director and others, including collaboration and empowerment, attentiveness to evidence, and acceptance of risk and failure as learning opportunities.

(b) Analysing and adjusting the underlying incentives, structures and processes supporting the Strategic Plan goals, such as convergence and a more holistic approach to resourcing issues. This will require balancing the twin aims of: (i) focusing on accountability for results and compliance with corporate standards; and (ii) empowering staff and decentralizing decision-making.

(c) Affirming a robust and actionable management response to this evaluation, and ensuring that accountabilities are noted and followed up on by UNICEF leadership, including the Executive Director.

63. None of the recommendations will succeed without effective leadership, so all are its dependencies. The overarching recommendation is the need for a visible presence from senior leadership, including the Executive Director, in acting on the recommendations of the exercise. This is important both for ensuring accountability and because leadership is a key driving factor in the specific recommendations themselves.

V. Recommendations

64. The following 12 recommendations are those enumerated in the report. They address the critical areas in which positive action will likely lead to significant improvement in the organization's readiness. There are many other recommended actions in the report, however. UNICEF will consider those in addition to these 12 recommendations, as well as others it will identify from its ongoing appreciation of the report.

65. **Accelerate programmatic and organizational convergence towards outcomes for children** (high priority; likely to be cost-neutral or cost-saving)

UNICEF needs to strengthen the enabling environment for convergence by: 1. codifying convergence into programming guidance, building on the experience of countries with successful pilots; 2. aligning supportive policies, procedures and capacities; and 3. addressing the cultural aspects by incentivizing system thinking, enhanced multisectoral/comprehensive approaches, and innovation and risk-taking.

66. **Clarify accountabilities for delivery of the Strategic Plan** (high priority; likely to be cost-saving)

The clarity of the strategic elements intent in the Strategic Plan needs to be accompanied by equally clear follow-through mechanisms by: 1. building from the revised accountability framework to specify the roles, responsibilities, deliverables and resources that underpin them; 2. following up with regular monitoring, reporting and evaluation; and 3. manifesting visible leadership.

67. **Reduce structural competition to support Strategic Plan performance** (high priority; likely to be cost-saving and/or able to improve allocative efficiency)

Competition across the lengthy list of priorities competing for country-level bandwidth can be reduced by: 1. examining the justification for every Strategic Plan central unit/element and collapsing redundancies into fewer structures (for example, resilience, peacebuilding, risk-informed humanitarian-development nexus programming); 2. promoting much greater coordinated action across related functions, such as the evidence functions; and 3. including a performance assessment rating for cooperativeness.

68. **Provide additional clarity for country-level Strategic Plan prioritization processes** (high priority; cost-neutral, and with the potential to improve allocative efficiency)

Actions that can realize the Strategic Plan's intent that the strategic elements are to be a menu of options from which country offices may draw from rather than structures to be applied to all contexts and can include: 1. providing greater clarity for country offices on prioritizing and focusing on Strategic Plan elements in different contexts, including a focus on middle- and high-income contexts; 2. enhancing the roles of regional offices in this process; and 3. creating guidance on identifying good and poor fits for the strategic elements with different programme environments.

69. **Strengthen change management capability** (high priority; requires additional human resources, including specialist support to change initiatives)

The Strategic Plan requires substantial changes in approach and culture, including: 1. strong engagement by senior leaders, providing the necessary direction and ensuring that the cultural aspects that drive change are modelled; 2. making change management more systematic along the continuous improvement model; and 3. ensuring that changes are tested and piloted, and reinforced with an integrated internal communication approach.

70. **Directly address the divergence between Strategic Plan financial resources and demand needs** (high priority; requires resource reallocation, and may potentially require additional human and financial resources in specific areas)

Coping with continued earmarking by donors and shifts in the resourcing environment requires: 1. undertaking an actual Strategic Plan costing to quantify the resources required to meet the Plan's ambitions; 2. revisiting, with partners, the principles guiding resource allocation to different contexts and organizational needs; 3. incentivizing realistic country-level budgeting and action plans around needs rather than on historical trends of resources received; 4. entering into more cooperative, cost-shared programming with partners; and 5. pursuing efficiency gains beyond the current Headquarters Efficiency Initiative.

71. **Ensure practical collaboration and a joined-up approach to data, research, evaluation and knowledge management** (high priority; likely to be resource-saving)

Despite shared principles, a practical collaborative approach is needed across the evidence functions of UNICEF, including: 1. developing a more integrated and coherent approach that is responsive to the need to inform programming and decision-making, including a common strategy, framework, targeted approaches and resource mobilization; and 2. maintaining necessary independence and distinctiveness in role within the joint strategies.

72. **Capitalize on the full potential of intersectionality** (high priority; resource-neutral)

To meet the commitment to intersectionality that is not yet evident in practice, UNICEF needs to: 1. clearly articulate how intersectionality complements but differs from convergence, equity and related approaches currently employed in UNICEF; 2. develop practical approaches with sufficient evidence of the effectiveness and challenges to consider in going-to-scale decisions; and 3. expand the Global Technical Team's approach to applicable cross-cutting areas such as gender and disability.

73. **Address gaps and technical barriers to effective periodic programme and strategic reviews** (high priority; requires investment up front but may eventually be cost-saving)

Measuring the progress of the Strategic Plan – especially outcomes – to support strategic decision-making will require: 1. rebalancing resources towards the new monitoring, evaluation and learning processes and away from compliance reporting; 2. articulating and incentivizing a strong demand for evidence from decision makers; 3. supporting the utilization of Strategic Plan evidence for decision-making at the Global Management Team or country office/regional office levels; and 4. developing technical approaches beyond extensive large-scale social data surveys for capturing outcomes.

74. **Improve the flow of knowledge and access to technical capacity** (medium priority; likely to be resource-neutral)

Essential actions to strengthen technical capacities to support implementation include: 1. improving the flow of knowledge and access to technical capacity, including expertise in essential and newer areas; 2. examining how UNICEF can best deliver technical support via internal resources versus securing support via partnerships or the market; and 3. providing learning opportunities for staff to diversify and develop their skills in critical areas.

75. **Define and enact a systematic approach for responses to global shocks** (medium priority; requires additional resources to develop and implement relevant systems)

Drawing on the documented global lessons from the response to COVID-19 and other systemic crises, UNICEF should consider: 1. further focusing on trend forecasting, foresight, and readiness to respond to major/global shocks not specific to emergency response situations; 2. extending the effective learning from systemic crises with longer-term assessments of the effects and responses; and 3. using foresight analysis to inform the development of country programme documents and strengthen adaptive programming.

76. **Clarify the focus on climate action** (medium priority; resource-neutral)

Given the newness of the priority as well as the criticality of this area for Strategic Plan outcomes and the Sustainable Development Goals, UNICEF needs to consider: 1. identifying its niche in climate action and adaptation, and clarifying the focus to staff and partners; and 2. leveraging the UNICEF brand and the voice of children as agents of change.

77. A management response to the evaluation report is presented separately to the Executive Board by UNICEF management.

VI.   Draft decision

The Executive Board

Takes note of the evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, its summary (E/ICEF/2023/3) and its management response (E/ICEF/2023/4).

Annex

Evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025

1.   Due to space limitations, the evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 is not contained within the present annex.

2.   The report is available on the UNICEF Evaluation Office website: https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/reports#/.

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