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## United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

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Item 7 of the provisional agenda\*

### Update on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

#### *Summary*

This report is submitted pursuant to Executive Board decision 2022/6, which “[r]equests UNICEF to provide an update to the Executive Board on how the organization is preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse in its policies, procedures and operations at headquarters, regional and country levels ... and asks that this includes analysis of available data and implementation of system-wide initiatives, including the Implementing Partners Protocol and use of the Implementing Partner Capacity Assessment and ClearCheck”; and “requests UNICEF to share headquarters-level action plans with the Executive Board annually”.

The report provides a progress update on the work of UNICEF in implementing its strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

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

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\* E/ICEF/2023/9.



## I. Overview

1. Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and safeguarding more broadly, is a corporate priority for UNICEF. The organization's strategy to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse has five pillars: accountability and prevention, reporting, victim assistance, investigations and sanctions, and partnerships. In 2022, for the first time UNICEF measured progress in this long-term work across these pillars through indicators of its Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 (see [E/ICEF/2023/5](#)). This report details the progress that has been made.

2. Organizational prevention measures have a strong focus on assessments. UNICEF headquarters and 87 per cent of country offices have now comprehensively assessed their systems to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse, and have drawn up “action plans” with assigned responsibilities to address gaps. The assessment carried out by headquarters looked at systems such as global policy, vetting, training and investigation measures that covered the whole organization.

3. To encourage proactive measures to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, in 2022 UNICEF set targets for the number of offices measuring and managing safeguarding risks. In 2022, only 75 offices recorded that they managed safeguarding risks, although all were thought to face such risks. New risk management leadership, amended guidance, and improved tools should help offices and UNICEF as a whole to construct a more accurate risk portrait in the near future.

4. Furthermore, the prevention measures applied by UNICEF place particular emphasis on the organization's personnel. UNICEF is carefully vetting personnel (including through the use of ClearCheck), training them (19 out of 20 staff have completed the relevant mandatory training), and managing their safeguarding through the UNICEF performance management framework. Although surveys indicate that almost all staff are aware of their safeguarding obligations, internal awareness-raising and improvements in performance management are expected to make the UNICEF workforce safer still.

5. A strong focus on reporting remains a priority. UNICEF met its benchmarks on work with partners and personnel to improve reporting effectiveness, awareness and access. In 2022, a significant majority of country offices expanded awareness of reporting channels among personnel and partners. Over 48 million people are estimated to now have access to safe reporting channels. Many of these channels are not dedicated to complaints relating to sexual exploitation and abuse but are used for general complaints as well. Underreporting remains a concern: community surveys suggest gaps in awareness about how and what to report. Efforts to improve communities' knowledge of their rights and how to report incidents will continue.

6. UNICEF is continuing efforts to mitigate harm caused through sexual exploitation and abuse through victim assistance. Sixty-nine countries had referral procedures in place by the end of 2022, a modest improvement over recent years. To maintain this progress, investment will be needed in countries' referral systems and in the Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection programmes that provide the underlying services.

7. UNICEF also continues its efforts on investigations and sanctions. The number of sexual exploitation and abuse cases involving UNICEF personnel or those of partners implementing its programmes, which were reported to the Office of the Secretary-General, has remained relatively stable over the past three years. Investigation, and any subsequent disciplinary action, is complex and time-consuming, exceeding time targets, despite prioritization. All three personnel

members found to have committed sexual exploitation or abuse in 2022 were terminated.

8. UNICEF is also reinforcing its efforts to strengthen partnerships, focusing particularly on building partner capacity across the sector to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse. In 2020, UNICEF began systematically assessing the capacity of all of its 4,200-plus civil society partners to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse, and helped these organizations to address gaps. By 2022, for three quarters of country offices, four fifths of their partners had satisfactory safeguarding systems. In 2022, UNICEF began working with other agencies to standardize and share these assessments, based on the United Nations Implementing Partners Protocol. UNICEF has also begun safeguarding work with suppliers engaging in high-risk activities.

9. UNICEF continues to collaborate actively with other agencies and organizations in standard-setting and work planning, targeted initiatives, sharing of best practices, and coordinating to manage individual partnerships and cases.

10. Despite progress, challenges remain. Long-term investments are needed to address the root causes of sexual exploitation and abuse, which include: economic and social vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation; a lack of effective law enforcement to stop sexual abuse; social and gender norms tolerant of abuses; the absence of safe, quality assistance which might motivate people to report; and weaknesses in organizational mechanisms to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.

11. UNICEF continues to make investments to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse. Between 2018 and 2023, the organization committed over \$40 million in core resources, in addition to programme resources at country level. The resources target country-level work where risks are highest, to continue to drive progress in accordance with the UNICEF strategy. The availability of quality funding to UNICEF is instrumental in that progress.

## **II. Introduction**

12. In its decision 2022/6, the Executive Board asked UNICEF to provide an update to the Executive Board on how the organization is preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse in its policies, procedures and operations at headquarters, regional and country levels.

13. The present document is being submitted to the Executive Board in fulfilment of that request. It contains an update on the progress made since the first regular session of 2022, in pursuance of the UNICEF strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, measured by metrics described by UNICEF in the report presented at the first regular session of 2023 ([E/ICEF/2023/5](#)).

14. The present report complements another UNICEF report concerning the organization's efforts to improve organizational culture and address sexual harassment.

## **III. Update on the progress implementing the UNICEF strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment**

15. The UNICEF strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment describes the organization's comprehensive approach. The strategy embodies a victim/survivor-centred approach that includes the following elements:

- (a) Non-discrimination in providing services;
- (b) Confidentiality issues and the interests of survivors are considered before and during all cases;
- (c) Complaint mechanisms are safe (risk-assessed), gender-sensitive and appropriate to the context (having been developed in consultation with affected communities, particularly the most vulnerable);
- (d) Making services available for survivors, linking complaint mechanisms to those services, and training humanitarian actors on this approach, in line with the United Nations protocol on the provision of assistance to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse (Victims Assistance Protocol);
- (e) The best interests of the children and survivors guides how assistance is designed and provided;
- (f) The parties are appropriately updated on processes, such as investigations and available support;
- (g) Training for implementing partners on how to undertake survivor-centred and child-friendly investigations;
- (h) Protections against retaliation.

16. Globally, survivor-centrism is made explicit in the Strategy and in the United Nations Victims Assistance Protocol, and is intrinsic to safe programming. Country-level staff have received training on how to operationalize the approach. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the country office offered dedicated training for investigators on a victim/survivor-centred approach to investigations. In Lebanon, in collaboration with the in-country protection from sexual exploitation and abuse network, UNICEF conducted trainings for investigators and established a pool of external investigators with standard operating procedures embodying a survivor-centred approach in investigations. In Zambia, UNICEF partnered with an international non-governmental organization to flexibly fund transportation, psychosocial support, and small stimulus packages for survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse by personnel of local non-governmental organization partners.

17. As noted at the first regular session of 2023, UNICEF has aligned its Strategic Plan indicators with elements of its strategy to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse and the United Nations quadrennial comprehensive policy review indicators. The indicators collectively monitor:

- (a) Annual planning, at headquarters and country levels, to provide better protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (action plans);
- (b) Psychological safety and trust as perceived by staff, as a reflection of effective individual accountability;
- (c) Risk assessment and registration at a corporate level, as an element of prevention;
- (d) Training and internal communications for and by leaders;
- (e) Gender composition of the organization;
- (f) Reach and audience awareness of reporting mechanisms (both internal and for the community);
- (g) Availability of victim assistance, at country level;
- (h) Investigative and sanctions mechanisms, as an element of the headquarters action plan;

(i) Partner capacity, of civil society implementing partners, to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse.

18. As discussed below, in most areas the indicators reflect good progress in strengthening relevant systems at UNICEF and at its partners. An annual review of our systems and plans for improvement is carried out at UNICEF as an organization and at most country offices. Our ethical and safeguarding values are embedded through training and dialogue across the organization and personnel overwhelmingly know their obligations. Of over 5,000 personnel surveyed, almost 99 per cent think UNICEF policies on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse are clear and taken seriously, 98 per cent understand standards of conduct, and 95 per cent know their reporting obligations. Country offices have improved measures to increase partner reporting and community access to reporting. Most partner organizations of UNICEF have now been assessed as having satisfactory capacity to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse. At an enterprise level, managed safeguarding risks appear to be underreported. Localized procedures for providing quality victim assistance are more widespread than before.

19. The ultimate impact of these efforts on the incidence of sexual exploitation and abuse is difficult to measure. At any given time, data on the actual incidence of sexual exploitation and abuse, like those for other sexual offences and forms of gender-based violence, are scarce. Different approaches are used to gather these data. For example, in many countries, such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Haiti, UNICEF uses its electronic messaging and polling platform, U-Report, to ask communities about their knowledge of instances of misconduct and reporting channels, and their preferred reporting channels. Polling data are posted on the U-Report website.<sup>1</sup> In the State of Palestine, community awareness was assessed through a Multisectoral Needs Assessment. U-Report polls and needs assessments often indicate that many community members know of cases of sexual exploitation and abuse and other forms of abuse by the broader aid community. However, these anonymous surveys do not permit identification or quantification of incidents. Thus, the true number of cases is uncertain. Respondents in the same surveys also often state that they do not know how to report sexual exploitation and abuse or would be reluctant to report it. Accordingly, UNICEF presumes that the true incidence levels exceed reported numbers. Apart from challenges in measuring incidence, it is difficult to causally attribute a reduction in a reported level of sexual exploitation or abuse to a particular intervention, such as training.

20. The approach of UNICEF is to continue to gather information about the magnitude of the problem, while employing prudent measures to prevent it, and investing in reporting and response systems to bring reported numbers closer to actual incidence. It employs a high risk tolerance when investing in safeguarding and a low risk tolerance for violations.

## **A. An organizational culture of zero tolerance built through accountability, prevention and gender equality**

### **1. Accountability**

21. As noted in the report of the accountability system of UNICEF (E/ICEF/2022/24), safeguarding, including protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, is a guiding principle of accountability and a corporate priority for UNICEF.

22. Action plans to improve protection from sexual exploitation and abuse have been developed in 112 of 129 country offices (87 per cent). Of these action plans, 67

<sup>1</sup> See <https://ureport.in>.

per cent are updated annually and monitored. These action plans are based on a United Nations-wide template. The action plans are tracked through Strategic Plan indicator 3.5 (“Percentage of country offices that have a system in place to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse”).

23. In 2022, UNICEF continued to spread the message of individual accountability through internal communications campaigns. For example, in October 2022, UNICEF marked Ethics Month with a focus on the core value of accountability. Ethics dialogues were facilitated in offices around the world, focused on what accountability looks like in practice, including accountability from (a) staff member to UNICEF; (b) staff member to UNICEF colleagues and teams; (c) staff member to UNICEF partners, communities that UNICEF works in and the children that UNICEF serves; and (d) UNICEF to staff members as staff, as well as UNICEF partners, the communities that UNICEF works in and the children that UNICEF serves. The Ethics and Culture Champions who facilitated these dialogues used case studies on sexual exploitation and abuse during the conversations. Such case studies were also discussed during the “Global Conversation on Accountability in Action”. These efforts were part of an overall internal communications effort relating to “Values in Action” that is being implemented globally in 2022–2023 to raise awareness of the core values of UNICEF and their application. In 2022, the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations also gave presentations on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse to UNICEF personnel and implementing partners in several regions, with a focus on reporting mechanisms and investigation processes.

24. One measure of the impact of these efforts internally is an organizational culture of psychological safety and trust, where employees feel safe raising issues, problems and concerns to managers for action. Greater psychological safety is conducive to employees reporting possible misconduct and feeling comfortable identifying other safeguarding challenges.

25. UNICEF tracks psychological safety and trust as a key dimension in the Global Staff Survey (most recently conducted in 2022) and through the Pulse Checks on Workplace Culture, which are held twice a year. It is also tracked as Strategic Plan indicator 4.4. Staff perceptions about protection from sexual exploitation and abuse are also collected through a survey administered by the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse.

26. Data from the UNICEF 2022 Global Staff Survey indicate that, despite high levels of knowledge of what constitutes misconduct, and where and how to report it, employees do not feel fully comfortable reporting. This indicates that further efforts are needed to strengthen psychological safety and trust in the organization’s mechanisms to protect them from retaliation. The data from the survey on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse are similar, indicating low but troubling levels of fear of retaliation. Past efforts to develop a “speak-up” culture bore fruit, and this was one of the areas of greatest progress between the 2020 and 2022 Global Staff Surveys. The effective communications campaigns and ethics dialogues will be sustained.

27. The Executive Director’s certification concerning protection from sexual exploitation and abuse is also provided to the Executive Board.

## **2. Prevention**

28. Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse comes first when embracing a “do no harm” philosophy. The UNICEF strategy mitigates risks across the contractual life cycle of personnel and partners, through careful vetting of candidates, to securing ethical commitments, to training and active management. The strategy also recognizes

the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse that arise from the contexts in which UNICEF operates, and from programme design. Collectively, these risks are preventatively managed at an enterprise level.

29. To screen personnel appropriately, UNICEF uses risk-related measures, including cautions in job advertisements, self-disclosure questionnaires, assessment questions, reference checks and background checks. The background checks include searching for candidates' past United Nations experience in the United Nations-wide ClearCheck database, which records United Nations personnel accused of sexual harassment, exploitation or abuse who were terminated for substantiated allegations, or who refused to cooperate in their investigation and resigned. In 2022, 247 candidates were screened by UNICEF against the ClearCheck database, with zero "hits". Four former members of UNICEF staff were placed in the ClearCheck database. Two hundred and seventy-one verification requests were received by UNICEF from other United Nations entities, with zero "hits".

30. UNICEF maintains gender parity overall in its workforce, with some disparities at particular staff grade levels and duty stations. Following the certification under EDGE (Economic Dividends for Gender Equality) in 2022, UNICEF has committed to increasing the number of women serving in hardship (non-family) duty stations, and putting in place specific measures to enable this.

31. Once personnel have been contracted, there is mandatory, monitored induction training on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse for all personnel. Compliance levels are generally good: 95 per cent of staff have completed the mandatory course. Almost 99 per cent of surveyed personnel report that the training on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse is valuable. As training appears to be effective and further training is frequently suggested by surveyed personnel, encouraging uptake will continue to be a priority in 2023.

32. Other training and internal communication efforts are described in the report by UNICEF titled "Update on organizational culture and diversity" (E/ICEF/2023/13), which is being presented at the annual session of 2023.

33. The performance management system at UNICEF contains indicators for all staff and managers relating to safeguarding. A 2022 audit of performance management is expected to lead to changes in the way performance is managed, which should provide opportunities to further improve ethical behaviour and safeguarding.

34. Civil society partners are in most instances the primary interface between UNICEF and local communities. Their capacity to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse is vital. As with UNICEF personnel, staff working for partners need to be carefully vetted, committed, supported in terms of capacity, and actively managed.

35. Having assessed all 4,200-plus civil society partners through 2022, in 2023 UNICEF is sharing its assessments with other United Nations agencies in the UN Partner Portal and transitioning to a standardized United Nations-wide assessment for all new partnerships. The assessments of all existing partners will be fully aligned with the United Nations harmonized assessment tool by 2025, prioritizing partners with capacity gaps. As part of Strategic Plan indicator 3.5 ("Percentage of country offices that have a system in place to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse") UNICEF benchmarks the proportion of country offices' partners that have capacity to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse. Ninety-seven of the 129 country offices (75 per cent) have a cadre of partners with satisfactory systems (80 per cent or more of their partners have full or medium capacity to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse). In Cameroon, for example, all UNICEF partners, contractors and their affiliated staff are trained on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, including UNICEF reporting requirements and procedures. Partners were

supported in creating a focal point system, and the focal points were then trained as trainers. Key messages and communications materials (e.g., posters, brochures, etc.) are shared with partners and distributed in UNICEF-supported sites.

36. Building partner capacity is resource-intensive. With turnover of partners and their personnel, efficiencies and long-term investment are required. Some efficiencies will be gained as the United Nations system pools its efforts to raise the capacity of civil society partners in the sector, in keeping with the United Nations harmonized assessment. In 2023, UNICEF committed core resources to safeguarding in civil society partnerships. The continued availability of quality funding will be important in sustaining that capacity.

37. UNICEF has suppliers of services that perform similar functions to implementing partners. To address supply risks, the Mozambique Country Office began screening a list of assumed high-risk suppliers. It also began providing a briefing and training on standards, including online training for senior management staff twice a year and face-to-face training for suppliers' front-line staff.

38. Building on this experience, the UNICEF Supply Division initiated a pilot project to assess vendors' capacity in managing safeguarding risks, including sexual exploitation and abuse. The pilot will focus on vendors awarded long-term arrangements for services for a number of service categories identified as carrying higher potential of sexual exploitation and abuse and child abuse, given the potential direct contact with participants and communities receiving protection or assistance. The capacity of vendors will be assessed and areas for vendor development and strengthening identified. Public guidance is being developed to help vendors build capacity. When the pilot ends, Supply Division will consider how to mainstream assessment of vendor safeguarding capacity into supply processes across country offices in a risk-informed manner.

39. Sexual exploitation and abuse risks can be amplified by the context in which UNICEF works, making robust safeguarding measures particularly important. To measure contextual risks, in 2022, UNICEF, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom developed the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Risk Overview, a publicly available composite index of risks of sexual exploitation and abuse. The index provides an evidence-based analysis of risk drivers in humanitarian crises and disasters to support strategic and programmatic decisions about resource allocation, technical support requirements and risk management. It ranks the risk in countries with humanitarian response operations, enabling comparisons between countries and over time. The index can help to target use of limited humanitarian resources on priority issues and countries of concern.

40. UNICEF measures and aggregates overall safeguarding risks through its Enterprise Risk Management platform. In 2022, for the first time, recognition and management of safeguarding risks was benchmarked, through Strategic Plan indicator E.3.4 ("Percentage of offices that meet organizational benchmarks for addressing safeguarding risks"). It is based on the assumption that every office must manage such risks. In 2022, safeguarding risks were underreported, with only 64 country offices and 11 other offices identifying the risks. (Of those 64 country offices, just 59 per cent identified risks across both their programmes and operations.) Methodological and technological challenges appeared to hamper this overall safeguarding risk recognition and reduction. To improve risk management UNICEF appointed a Chief Risk Officer in the Office of the Executive Director. Amended guidance and tools should further help offices identify and mitigate safeguarding risks, including risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, in future.



## **B. Reporting mechanisms that are safe and trusted**

41. Mechanisms for personnel, partners and communities to report sexual exploitation and abuse must be known, accessible in practice and perceived to be safe and useful. A component of one Strategic Plan indicator measures the extent to which offices support internal and partner reporting. A separate Strategic Plan indicator measures the reach of community reporting mechanisms.

42. By 2022, 81 per cent (104 of 129) of country offices supported internal and partner access to reporting mechanisms, including through nomination of focal points and training partners on reporting. These are tracked as part of Strategic Plan indicator 3.5 (“Percentage of country offices that have a system in place to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse”).

43. In 2022, 110 country offices scaled up safe and accessible community reporting channels (20 per cent more than 2021). Tracked by Strategic Plan indicator 3.1.8, a total of 48.2 million children and adults across 110 country offices had access to reporting channels for sexual exploitation and abuse.

44. Mechanisms for reporting and reaching communities with messages about protection from sexual exploitation and abuse vary with the context. The Haiti Country Office established measures from the outset of the humanitarian response. A dedicated team raised awareness of UNICEF commitments, reporting channels and survivor assistance. It expanded access to reporting channels, engaged communities and disseminated awareness-raising material (including child-friendly messages in French and Creole). Hundreds of U-Reporters were trained on the topic to enable two-way communication between affected communities and UNICEF through U-Report. The Ghana Country Office mainstreamed protection from sexual exploitation and abuse into core child protection programmes, and developed Child Protection Community Facilitation Toolkits which included community engagement elements related to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. The work contributed to a rise in the number of people with access to reporting channels from 1,960 in 2021 to 1.8 million in 2022. The Colombia Country Office integrated protection from sexual exploitation and abuse into accountability to affected populations mechanisms. It developed guidelines to promote communities’ access to and information on sexual exploitation and abuse response and accountability mechanisms. The Ukraine Country Office used Facebook and Instagram to engage 1.6 million beneficiaries in dialogue about sexual exploitation and abuse and a safe humanitarian response. The Pakistan Country Office designed information, education and communications materials in local languages and various formats based on community consultation to address cultural sensitivities. Focal points were designated in each programme’s mobile team (polio, water, sanitation and hygiene, etc.) to raise awareness and pursue outreach activities. Group discussions targeted women, girls, adolescents and persons with disabilities to improve inclusion and sensitivity to vulnerabilities. In the Afghanistan Country Office, surveys on the U-Report platform helped with broad-based community engagement, including raising awareness on sexual exploitation and abuse issues and securing feedback on gaps. The survey feedback is used to develop risk mitigation measures and was used to prepare a training package for partners on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and investigations.

45. UNICEF has a whistle-blower protection policy, administered by its Ethics Office, which affords protection to staff who report misconduct or cooperate in investigations. To seek further protection of the personnel of civil society partners, in 2022, UNICEF revised its programme cooperation agreements to embed whistle-blowing commitments.

46. In 2022, the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations received and registered 435 new cases, including 167 concerning alleged misconduct by UNICEF staff members. Of the 435 new cases, sexual exploitation and abuse was the second-largest category (19 per cent), following fraud involving misuse of programme funds by third parties. Some of the reports of sexual exploitation and abuse involved persons unconnected to UNICEF.

47. Reports of sexual exploitation and abuse involving UNICEF personnel or partners implementing its programmes have been relatively stable over the past three years, broadly mirroring United Nations system-wide data.

48. UNICEF publicly reports, almost in real time, allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving its personnel and the partners implementing its programmes. From 1 January to 31 December 2022, it reported 49 sexual exploitation and abuse allegations, involving 61 victims and 54 perpetrators, including 5 UNICEF personnel and 49 personnel of partners implementing its programmes. The total numbers were slightly lower than the number of allegations that were publicly reported for the same period in 2021 (58 allegations, 6 of which involved UNICEF personnel) and roughly comparable to 2020 (47 allegations, 2 of which involved UNICEF personnel), and a significant increase from 2017 and 2018. Additional information on UNICEF allegations reported since 2017 can be found on the website of the United Nations Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>2</sup>

### **C. A quality, survivor-centred response**

49. The standard for the provision of support is the United Nations Victims Assistance Protocol, based on General Assembly resolution [62/214](#). The protocol outlines standards for the provision of assistance to survivors and children born of sexual exploitation and abuse, including services that should be provided through existing gender-based violence and child protection programming and other services: safety and protection; medical care; psychosocial support; education, livelihood support and basic material assistance; and legal services. For example, in Haiti, assistance to potential survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse is made possible through existing gender-based violence and child protection services. UNICEF has supported school fees, lunch boxes and other services for children born of sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as income-generating activities for their mothers. In Lebanon, UNICEF strengthened the victims' assistance provided by organizations serving remote locations and worked with government partners to integrate case management services in social development centres around the country.

50. UNICEF benchmarks the victim assistance provided as part of Strategic Plan indicator E.3.5 ("Percentage of country offices that have a system in place to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse"). It looks at the quality of the response based on the existence of contextualized procedures at inter-agency level for referrals and survivor assistance, its survivor-centred nature, integration of referral pathways into reporting mechanisms, the substantive and geographic scope of assistance provided, training on the procedures, and the use and monitoring of the procedures.

51. By the end of 2022, 69 countries had developed standard operating procedures at inter-agency level that integrate global victim assistance standards outlined in the United Nations Victims Assistance Protocol. Nineteen of those countries' standard operating procedures had met all the standards described above. There is now more rigorous review of quality standards established by the Protocol and its accompanying technical note. This led to a slight drop in the quality score from 2021 to 2022 in some

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<sup>2</sup> [www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/data-allegations-un-system-wide](http://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/data-allegations-un-system-wide).

regions, as countries were revising their procedures to better align with the Protocol standards. Country offices have flagged a lack of human and financial resources as a concern.

52. At an individual (anonymized) level, UNICEF reports on the services provided in response to sexual exploitation and abuse allegations by UNICEF personnel and partners implementing its programmes. The data appear on the website of the United Nations Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>3</sup> In 2022, 22 of 51 people affected (43 per cent) received services. In the remaining cases, the person affected declined or did not seek assistance, was unidentified or unreachable, or the status of assistance was still being confirmed. Psychosocial assistance or counselling were the most common forms of assistance provided, to 26 people in 10 countries; legal assistance was least common, provided in three cases in three countries. UNICEF and its partners also participate in the provision of assistance to survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse by other aid actors.

#### **D. Investigations and sanctions that are swift and credible**

53. The Office of Internal Audit and Investigations investigates allegations of sexual misconduct by UNICEF personnel. Institutional contractors, implementing partners and other third parties bear primary responsibility for investigating wrongdoing by their own personnel.

54. In 2022, the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations supported several organizational initiatives to strengthen the investigative capacity of implementing partners, including participating in training of implementing partners in four countries, and the development of training materials of two third-party investigative entities to ensure alignment with investigative best practices and the victim-centred approach. The Office also follows and reviews investigations into sexual exploitation and abuse conducted by third parties, including implementing partners, providing observations and recommendations regarding the adequacy of the investigative steps taken.

55. Country offices have also taken steps to address gaps in the investigative capacity of United Nations partners. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a standing pool of investigators was established for use by organizations that need it. The country office also provided training on how to conduct non-investigative preliminary assessments and respond to risks or “alerts” of sexual exploitation and abuse in the field.

56. As of 31 December 2022, of the five allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving UNICEF personnel publicly reported in 2022, the investigation of two cases had been concluded, with one case closed based on a finding that the allegations were unsubstantiated and one case closed based on the unavailability of sufficient information to assess the allegations. Of the 44 allegations involving implementing partner personnel reported in 2022, 21 were closed. Six cases were closed because the alleged perpetrators were found to have committed sexual exploitation and abuse and dismissed from the hiring entity; six cases were closed because there was a finding that the allegations were unsubstantiated; six cases were closed due to insufficient information to assess the allegation or lack of jurisdiction over the allegation; two cases were closed due to lack of collaboration or corroboration from the victim; and one case was closed because the alleged perpetrator separated from the hiring entity before the allegation was found to be substantiated.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

57. Under key performance indicators introduced in 2022, the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations aims to finalize 65 per cent of its cases under assessment within 90 days and 65 per cent of its cases under investigation within nine months. In 2022, the office closed 53 per cent of assessments of sexual exploitation and abuse (including assessments of implementing partner investigations) within 90 days, and 0 investigations of sexual exploitation and abuse within nine months.<sup>4</sup> All cases of sexual misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse, receive the highest level of prioritization. The complex and uniquely challenging nature of these cases, including the need to ensure potential victims receive appropriate support and provide informed consent to proceed with any investigative process, and difficulties identifying potential victims and subjects in some instances, can prolong timelines in some cases.

58. In 2022, UNICEF handled 60 cases that had been referred for possible disciplinary action. In 30 cases involving serving staff members, misconduct was established and disciplinary measures were imposed. Three of these cases involved sexual exploitation and abuse. In all three cases, the staff member responsible was dismissed. In a fourth case, a former staff member was the subject of allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse and did not cooperate in their investigation, resulting in a note in the personnel file and listing in the ClearCheck database.

59. Cases involving sexual exploitation and abuse are among the most complex to review. As a result, in such cases it takes an average of 13 weeks after the conclusion of the investigation to conduct a disciplinary process and reach a final decision.

## **E. Engaging partners in the fight against sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment**

60. Cooperation and coordination are essential to preventing and responding effectively to sexual exploitation and abuse.

61. UNICEF works with other agencies in aligning goals and interventions, sharing information about best practices, and coordinating work at the global, regional and country level.

62. At a global level, UNICEF contributes significantly to both the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the United Nations Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Working Group, and works with the Victims' Rights Advocate and the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse. As noted in the report presented at the first regular session of 2023 (E/ICEF/2023/5), UNICEF operationalizes its strategy through annual action plans, which are based on United Nations system-wide templates provided by the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse. Inter-agency alignment is measured by use of these templates, benchmarked as a quadrennial comprehensive policy review indicator.

63. Across humanitarian contexts, UNICEF has driven the results-based approach at the IASC, from the development of the "IASC Plan for Accelerating Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) in Humanitarian Response at Country-Level" to establishing a baseline across countries that is actively tracked on a global dashboard. In 2022, UNICEF led the development and roll-out of the IASC PSEA Core Indicators Guidance Note. The Guidance Note establishes for the first time a global set of inter-agency indicators that can be used to guide the implementation and monitoring of collective inter-agency progress across humanitarian responses, and

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<sup>4</sup> As there are many more assessments than investigations, in 2022, the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations closed 75 per cent of cases of sexual exploitation and abuse within nine months (including assessments of implementing partner investigations).

allow comparisons over time and among the countries. These core indicators (18 in total) help countries track and measure progress against the required minimum actions reflected in the United Nations Country Team and Humanitarian Country Team PSEA Action Plan Template. In line with its global lead role for the Victim Assistance Protocol roll-out on behalf of the United Nations and the IASC, UNICEF has provided technical support and training in implementing the protocol to humanitarian country teams and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse networks in eight countries, in addition to global and regional-level trainings for other professionals.

64. UNICEF also participates in global, issue-oriented initiatives. In 2022, UNICEF led policy work at the IASC to develop a “plain language” understanding of the IASC Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. In collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Office of Legal Affairs and the Victims’ Rights Advocate, a framework was developed for a roster of pro bono lawyers and legal aid organizations able to assist victims for a 2022 pilot. UNICEF also collaborated with the Victims’ Rights Advocate concerning a draft statement on victims’ rights. The organization continues work with other agencies, funds and programmes on guidance associated with the United Nations common assessment of the capacity of implementing partners, including government agency partners, to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse.

65. UNICEF launched and leads an inter-agency working group to establish a global framework for cooperation with governments on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. It aims to strengthen system-wide cooperation among government and United Nations agencies and bolster the capacity of government partners in protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse. A draft government collaboration framework was presented to the United Nations High-level Steering Group on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in February 2023.

66. Within countries, UNICEF regularly participates in and contributes to inter-agency and civil society networks. For example, in Mozambique, UNICEF supported the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse network in drafting a government engagement strategy at the national level. At the subnational level, the Cabo Delgado protection from sexual exploitation and abuse network initiated a strategic dialogue with the local government to advance the agenda, strengthened the capacity of government partners and worked on joint identification of referral pathways with the local public prosecutor’s office. In Türkiye, UNICEF conducted a comprehensive analysis of the legislative and policy framework related to sexual exploitation and abuse. This helped to identify gaps and opportunities for the United Nations and UNICEF in engagement with government, including capacity development, on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

67. UNICEF shares and solicits information from other agencies about best practices in protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse. For example, in 2022, UNICEF presented at and participated in ‘discussions for practitioners’ hosted by the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation. UNICEF also continued managing the IASC global website on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, which is used by over 160,000 practitioners. The website has strengthened the global IASC community of practice through knowledge management and country-level tracking of results.

68. In the context of individual partnerships and (typically anonymized) case data, inter-agency information-sharing is codified in inter-agency memorandums, the Management and Accountability Framework of the United Nations Development and Resident Coordinator System, and the standard operating procedures of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse networks. Globally, incident data are shared through the website of the Special Coordinator, staff perpetrator data are shared

through ClearCheck, and partnership data will be shared on the new United Nations Partner Portal. Locally, agencies actively coordinate case management (often through protection from sexual exploitation and abuse networks). For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Senior Victims' Rights Officer received complaints through community-based networks and collaborated with the United Nations Population Fund and UNICEF to facilitate medical and psychosocial support for victims through local partners.

#### **IV. Next steps**

69. In 2022, UNICEF made progress in a long-term approach to addressing sexual exploitation and abuse. The Strategic Plan indicators for protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse, and related data, have yielded insights about strengths, weaknesses and needs associated with the approach that UNICEF takes, together with its partners.

70. Further human and financial resources are required to expand the reach and quality of victim assistance, by improving the procedures and training of a number of country offices and their protection from sexual exploitation and abuse networks to appropriately refer survivors, and by addressing gaps in service availability through gender-based violence and child protection programming.

71. Recruitment of focal points in country offices, including at the onset of emergencies, has catalysed work. Tracking of initiatives across headquarters, country offices and United Nations country teams through action plans has resulted in better monitoring of progress on identified priorities.

72. The knowledge and commitment of UNICEF personnel remains a strength, which must be preserved and supported through refinements to policy, vetting and performance management, and reinforcement of learning. New tools and guidance are required to improve risk management. While significant progress has been made in strengthening implementing partners' capacity, about 40 per cent of partners have gaps in their capacity to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse (i.e., the organization is rated as having low or moderate capacity), and continued investment is required. In parallel, similar risks must be addressed in supply arrangements.

73. Active collaboration with other agencies and organizations will remain a priority to drive efficiencies and improve the quality of services. UNICEF will continue to collaborate actively on initiatives and share evidence with the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse and IASC globally, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse networks in-country, and donors, partners and suppliers. The United Nations common assessment for implementing partners and roll-out of the Victim assistance protocol will advance common standards and provide a more unified safeguarding face for the sector.

74. UNICEF action plans will be updated with lessons learned. Safeguarding, including protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, remains a corporate priority.

75. Between 2018 and the writing of this report, over \$40 million in core resources have been invested in safeguarding at UNICEF. With core resources at UNICEF declining in both relative and absolute terms, quality funding remains essential to ongoing progress in protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse.

## V. Draft decision

### *The Executive Board*

1. *Welcomes* the update provided by UNICEF on progress made on protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse;
  2. *Requests* UNICEF to provide an update to the Executive Board at the annual session of 2024 on how the organization is protecting against and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse.
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