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Annual report for 2023 on the evaluation function in UNICEF

Summary

The present report provides an overview of the UNICEF evaluation function in 2023, highlighting key achievements and areas of progress as well as challenges and gaps.

The report concludes with forward-looking reflections and suggestions regarding pathways for further strengthening of the function heading into the period covered by the new evaluation policy of UNICEF.

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

* [E/ICEF/2024/10](#).

Note: The present document was processed in its entirety by UNICEF.

I. Overview

1. The year 2023 was characterized both by continuity and progress for the UNICEF evaluation function. Trends on key performance indicators reported in 2022 largely endured in 2023. Evaluation coverage and quality remained high overall, but variability persisted across the function. In addition, although the integration of gender and disability considerations into evaluations remained high, the extent to which the gender lens was meaningfully integrated continued to be unacceptably low. Delays in the issuance of management responses continued, as did the further decline in overall organizational progress towards the target of spending 1 per cent of the overall budget on evaluation. Notably, however, spending at headquarters appeared to surpass this target.

2. This broad continuity of trends witnessed in 2022 can be explained by several factors. First, based on the results of the annual report for 2022 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2023/18](#)), a causal analysis was commissioned in mid-2023 to identify the root causes of, and potential solutions to, identified challenges. This analysis was completed in the third quarter of 2023, and although remedial actions were initiated at that time, there was insufficient time remaining in 2023 to reap rapid results from these actions. Second, four regional evaluation adviser posts remained vacant for much of 2023, leaving human resource gaps in a position that is crucial for making and sustaining progress in the evaluation function.

3. Significant gains were also made in 2023 to advance the evaluation function in fundamental ways that are not captured in the key performance indicators. Progress was made in areas that will help UNICEF and its partners to “move the needle” for children in the medium to longer term: national evaluation capacity development, aimed at empowering senior government officials with the knowledge and skills to be active learning and accountability partners for children; impact evaluation, which provides robust evidence of “what works” for children, helping UNICEF and its partners to make the most prudent investment choices in the face of finite resources; and evaluation synthesis, within UNICEF and together with partners, to elevate recurring issues requiring attention and thus accelerate delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals. Finally, 2023 witnessed the finalization of the revised evaluation policy of UNICEF, which was endorsed by the Executive Board at its second regular session of 2023.

4. Together, these efforts to forge a “next-generation” evaluation function for greater positive impact for children in the Decade of Action required a significant investment of time and resources. Viewed from this perspective, the high degree of continuity on almost all indicators suggests that the function performed well despite the many constraints it faced. At the same time, with the revised evaluation policy coming into force in 2024, efforts to address persistent gaps will need to be redoubled.

II. Key developments in the evaluation function

A. Background and priorities for 2023

5. Having fallen behind schedule in 2022 on the implementation of the plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025 ([E/ICEF/2022/3](#)), the Evaluation Office began the year with a focus on prioritizing delayed evaluations while advancing on 2023 commitments. In addition, the function focused on: (a) accelerating progress in two emerging and potentially powerful areas for helping Governments to achieve better results for children – namely, impact evaluation and national evaluation capacity development – as well as cultivating the strategic partnerships to amplify their success; (b) ensuring that the growing number of Level 3 emergencies were evaluated,

as required under the evaluation policy; and (c) expanding collaboration with other United Nations agencies to align workplans, complete and initiate new joint, inter-agency and system-wide evaluations, and conduct inter-agency evaluation syntheses.

6. In addition to delivering on these existing commitments, the evaluation function took on new areas of work in response to evolving organizational priorities. As implementation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 progressed, the number of “demand-driven” evaluations – that is, evaluations requested by stakeholders rather than being commissioned by the evaluation function itself – increased significantly, particularly in relation to the key enablers and change strategies identified in the Strategic Plan, which, as highlighted in the evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 ([E/ICEF/2023/3](#)), stood to benefit from more focused evaluation effort. In support of the organization’s growing work on sustainability and climate change and environmental and social safeguarding, the Evaluation Office undertook several analyses designed to inform UNICEF work in these nascent yet important areas of programming.

7. These developments unfolded within a broader context of heightened attention from the Executive Board on the independent oversight functions of UNICEF, including the evaluation function. They also occurred within a broader context of continued overall decline in organizational expenses on evaluation, both in real terms and as a percentage of total expenses, even as the organization made commendable progress by exceeding the 1 per cent target at headquarters level. In short, as the scope, scale and complexity of UNICEF programmes continued to grow, demands on the evaluation function increased substantially, beyond the resources available to it.

B. Vision for the function: the revised evaluation policy of UNICEF

8. In April 2023, an independent external peer review of the UNICEF evaluation function was completed. This exercise was a foundational input into a subsequent review and revision of the UNICEF evaluation policy. The peer review found that while UNICEF continued to make good progress towards strengthening its evaluation function in support of the organization’s mandate, challenges around the wider enabling environment limited consistent achievement of independence, credibility and utility. Further, it noted risks concerning management use of evaluations and the interactions between the evaluation function and other knowledge functions within UNICEF. Modalities of funding did not consistently support effective planning and commissioning of evaluations. The review concluded by offering suggestions and pathways for continued strengthening of the function, noting that the Evaluation Office has responsibilities for addressing some of the limitations but also needs to be empowered and supported by other elements within the enabling environment.

9. Incorporating these findings, as well as the feedback garnered from extensive consultations during the policy revision process, a draft revised evaluation policy was presented at the Executive Board’s annual session of 2023 and, upon the incorporation of feedback from its members, the revised evaluation policy of UNICEF was finalized and endorsed by the Executive Board at its second regular session of 2023 ([E/ICEF/2023/27](#) and [E/ICEF/2023/27/Corr.1](#)).

10. The revised policy embodies several transformational shifts necessary for ensuring that the evaluation function is optimally positioned to help UNICEF and partners achieve the best possible results at scale and accelerate results for children by 2030 and beyond. These and other shifts were presented at all three sessions of the Executive Board in 2023 and include the following:

(a) The policy now provides greater clarity on the definition, purposes and underlying principles of evaluation. It also articulates what is and is not considered evaluation, in keeping with the established international norms and standards of the function; this demarcation has important ramifications for determining what is and is not covered by the policy, what is eligible and ineligible for funds ring-fenced for evaluation, and what can be counted as evaluation in reporting on coverage and expenditure.

(b) The policy also clarifies coverage standards – that is, what type and level of evaluation effort is indicated in various contexts and when.

(c) Reiterating the organization’s commitment to the adequate and predictable resourcing of the function to enable it to fulfil its role, the policy renews existing commitments to ensure that 1 per cent of the programme budget is allocated to evaluation.

(d) A new formula for calculating evaluation expenditure, agreed in collaboration with the Division of Finance, Administration and Management, alongside which a more systematic and accurate mechanism for internal monitoring and reporting on evaluation expenses was established.

(e) Commitment to strengthening the independence of the function at the decentralized level is a fixture of the policy, as is the commitment to ensuring uniformly high relevance, credibility and utility of evaluations across the organization.

11. Following endorsement of the policy, the Evaluation Office took steps to lay the groundwork for its timely and effective implementation. A global evaluation meeting in November brought together the evaluation team from all levels of the organization, together with a broad range of other colleagues, to identify a way forward for ensuring that the policy is consistently and meaningfully implemented across the organization.

12. The Evaluation Office also deepened its collaboration with regional offices in 2023, as part of overall efforts to strengthen the capacity and independence of the evaluation function at the decentralized level. The revised evaluation policy clarifies and emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of regional directors and regional evaluation advisers in a matrix management relationship with the Director of Evaluation, and in 2023 progress was made in ensuring that both offices work in close collaboration to ensure that the revised policy is consistently and meaningfully implemented at all levels of the organization. This included, for example, the direct and significant involvement of the Director of Evaluation in the recruitment of four new regional evaluation advisers in 2023, even as regional directors remained the hiring managers for these positions.

C. Noteworthy evaluation contributions to results

13. Numerous evaluations finalized in 2023 were particularly well received, and were used to inform organizational decision-making processes. In the institutional effectiveness portfolio, these included the evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the global advocacy priorities of the Strategic Plan, the baseline assessment of UNICEF environmental and social safeguards implementation, the evaluation of UNICEF investments towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change, and the joint evaluation of the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Collective Service, in collaboration with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the World Health Organization. In addition, the Evaluation Office conducted a comprehensive synthesis of UNICEF evaluations covering the period 2018–2022 with the aim of providing an evidence-based summary of the organization’s main achievements, as well as areas where it can improve.

14. The Evaluation Office completed two major evaluations of Level 3 emergencies in 2023 (Afghanistan and northern Ethiopia), and continued with work on evaluations of the Level 3 responses in Haiti, the Horn of Africa, the Syrian Arab Republic/Türkiye, Ukraine and Yemen, as well as on the UNICEF approach to localization. Importantly, the duration of humanitarian evaluations in 2023 was almost halved in comparison with previous years, and the planning for evaluations of Level 3 responses generally began shortly after the activation of the corporate procedure, allowing the findings and recommendations to inform ongoing UNICEF responses in a timelier fashion and to facilitate the generation and dissemination of rapid and actionable learning in concrete ways.

15. With respect to Goal Areas under the UNICEF Strategic Plan, the Evaluation Office produced a wide array of evaluations in 2023, including in the areas of water, sanitation and hygiene, social protection, immunization, children affected by migration and others. This included the final evaluation of the Accelerating Water and Sanitation for All Programme, which was implemented in eight countries. This evaluation used innovative data analysis to approximate intervention impact and included four thematic case studies focusing on climate and conflict; water, sanitation, hygiene and nutrition; gender and inclusion; and sustainability. The findings will inform the next phase of the Programme.

16. Numerous influential evaluations were produced at the decentralized level as well. For example, the evaluation of the UNICEF country programme of cooperation in Bhutan produced a number of lessons learned that directly informed the development of the new country programme document, including around integrated programming, disaggregated data and the importance of matching skilling programmes with market demand. Findings from a multi-country formative evaluation of birth registration in Chad guided reform of the institutional and legal framework of the civil registry system in that country. An endline evaluation of the Rwanda Girls' Education Programme, 2019–2023 found that learners in treatment schools improved their English scores by 28 per cent compared with the control group, leading the Government to adopt remedial learning on a national scale. The results of a formative and big data evaluation on inclusive education in Kazakhstan were incorporated into the response plan of the Ministry of Education. In the Philippines, UNICEF supported a country-led evaluation of the First 1,000 Days Programme in order to assess the impact of government programming for children under the age of 2 years. In addition to informing the design of the UNICEF Philippines country programme for the period 2024–2028, the evaluation informed the Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition 2023–2028 and the Government's multisectoral nutrition project loan.

17. The evaluation function also supported the roll-out of the UNICEF Sustainability and Climate Change Action Plan, 2023–2030 through the development of guidance for systematically integrating a climate lens into UNICEF evaluations, and provided significant support for ethical design for major research projects such as the U-Report poll on girls' rights. In addition, the Evaluation Office led efforts to update guidance on the conduct and management of evaluation in emergency settings.

D. Impact evaluation

18. Impact evaluation is an area of evaluation distinct from a similarly named exercise, that is, *evaluations of impact*, which are standard evaluations that measure organizational performance in making positive changes in children's lives at the long-term impact level. By contrast, impact evaluation is a method for testing whether a specific intervention (or combination of interventions) demonstrates sufficiently robust evidence of success. Impact evaluation therefore serves as a vital tool for

helping Governments as well as UNICEF itself make evidence-based decisions about which interventions to invest in, based on “what works” and what is most cost-effective.

19. A key milestone on impact evaluation in 2023 was the successful launch of the Impact Catalyst Fund, a strategic initiative to support high-quality impact evaluations in priority thematic areas of the Strategic Plan. The first call for proposals, focusing on child marriage and social norms, was launched in March 2023 and sparked significant interest, resulting in applications from six out of seven UNICEF regions. Ultimately, six proposals were selected to receive matching grants to support the design and primary data collection for rigorous impact evaluations. A second call for proposals, implemented through the broader partnership with the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, focused on adaptive social protection.

20. The function undertook five impact evaluations in 2023, all at the decentralized level. One of these, the impact evaluation of the Ujana Salama cash-plus model in the United Republic of Tanzania, is the first evaluation to provide evidence on the effectiveness of a cash-plus intervention targeted at adolescents and implemented within an existing government-run social protection programme.

21. In order to ensure maximum relevance and utility of impact evaluations, UNICEF also worked to mainstream impact feasibility assessments into standard evaluation planning processes. Impact feasibility assessments examine opportunities, limitations and requirements for measuring outcomes and impacts in specific programme contexts. Two impact feasibility assessments were completed in 2023, on the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and on mental health and psychosocial support, while an impact feasibility assessment measuring the impact of climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene programming is ongoing.

E. National evaluation capacity development

22. Multiple initiatives were undertaken in 2023 to accelerate the strengthening of national evaluation capacity. While UNICEF continued to develop the technical capacities of individuals to conduct evaluations, the focus was on building an enabling environment for evaluation use at the national level and promoting the importance of evaluative evidence on the global stage.

23. At the intergovernmental level, and under the leadership of the Government of Nigeria with support from UNICEF and other agencies, the General Assembly adopted resolution [77/283](#) on strengthening voluntary national reviews through country-led evaluation. The resolution encourages Member States to present regular voluntary national reviews with a country-led evaluation component and to use evidence from evaluations for decision-making and reporting on their progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

24. At the national level, UNICEF efforts were twofold: continued focus on providing the technical support demanded at an operational level, while complementing these efforts with an innovative course to meet the needs of senior leaders for a higher-level orientation on evaluation. This latter initiative, the Executive Course for Evaluation Leaders (ExCEL), was launched in 2022 and gained significant momentum in 2023, with a total of six ExCEL cohorts delivered in English, Arabic and Russian. Approximately 120 senior government partners from 45 countries in six regions completed the course, with new cohorts consistently being oversubscribed. As part of the course, the delegations developed medium- and long-term ExCEL action plans, and country offices are actively supporting their

implementation. This initiative has already borne fruit, enabling space for evaluation at the national policy level. One of the main innovative aspects of ExCEL is its explicit focus on the sustainability of its effects, namely by steadily building a partnership of like-minded public administration training institutions in Benin, Germany, Singapore and South Africa, with more partners slated to join the coalition in 2024.

25. Momentum was also built in relation to the online Intermediate Moderated Programme for Evaluation Systems Strengthening (IMPrESS), which complements ExCEL by enhancing technical skills needed by evaluation practitioners and managers. Ten cohorts of IMPrESS were delivered in 2023, reaching more than 300 government participants and other partners in English-speaking countries.

26. Numerous initiatives at country and regional levels also sought to build technical capacity. These included the elaboration of national evaluation policies and monitoring and evaluation frameworks in Bangladesh, Lesotho and Nigeria and the first-ever evaluation forum in the Dominican Republic. Building upon its existing partnership with the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results, the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office established a long-term agreement with four institutions to support national evaluation capacity in English and French. The UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia developed a road map for supporting national evaluation capacity at different levels of government within the context of its regional evaluation strategy.

27. Together, these efforts have the potential to influence decision makers' perception of, and discourse on, evaluation, and to support evaluative thinking and evidence-informed policymaking within Governments around the globe.

F. Innovations and other creative solutions

28. In the current context of rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), and the growing need for cost-effective and robust alternative evaluative methods, UNICEF explored potential applications of AI analytics in various evaluation tasks. A number of pilot projects led by the Evaluation Office in 2023 focused on using AI for analysing text data from UNICEF documents such as evaluation reports, country office annual reports, situational analyses, country programme documents and other internal monitoring data.

29. In a synthesis of UNICEF evaluations conducted in 2023, advanced text mining and machine learning methods were used to gather insights from a large number of reports. Further integration of machine learning into evaluation practice has the potential to bring substantial efficiency gains through automatization of analytical processes and greater utilization of UNICEF institutional data. Reflecting its investment in this area, UNICEF co-chairs the data and AI working group of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), contributing to a draft UNEG guidance paper titled, "Ethical principles for use of AI in evaluation" – an area of paramount importance to UNICEF in a fast-changing space, especially regarding evaluations involving children.

30. Further methodological innovations abound, with an enhanced focus on evaluability assessments, readiness assessments and formative evaluation – especially, though not exclusively, related to institutional effectiveness. In 2023, UNICEF conducted an evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of its advocacy approaches and an evaluation of its investments towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change, both of which will be presented in detail at the 2024 annual session of the Executive Board.

31. As part of its efforts to strengthen outcome-level evidence in fragile and humanitarian contexts, the Evaluation Office designed and operationalized evaluations to measure the outcomes of the UNICEF response to Level 3 emergencies in Afghanistan and Ukraine. By using primary and secondary data sources, the evaluations produced near-real-time, robust evidence in a cost-effective manner to inform the ongoing response.

32. The function has also begun to undertake more evaluation synthesis, a methodology which aggregates and distils evaluative evidence from a variety of existing evaluations in order to inform strategic decision-making. For example, in 2023, in partnership with Newcastle University, the Evaluation Office conducted a comprehensive synthesis of 631 UNICEF evaluations covering the period 2018–2022, supported by qualitative interviews, with the aim of providing an evidence-based summary of the organization’s main achievements against each Goal Area of the Strategic Plan, including key factors that have enabled or hindered such achievements and areas where it can improve. The synthesis will serve as an important independent outcome-level analysis to complement the Global Effectiveness Review, and offers a promising example of how the rich body of existing evidence available to UNICEF can be efficiently and cost-effectively leveraged and better utilized. The report was accompanied by an evaluation evidence “gap map” in relation to each Goal Area – a crucial insight that will help the organization to make strategic choices about how to invest finite evaluation resources in the future.

33. Finally, in line with the findings of the independent peer review and strengthened organizational commitments around community engagement, participation of children and young people and accountability to affected populations, the evaluation function explored new and innovative ways of engaging with communities and young people.

34. For example, the evaluation of the UNICEF Level 3 drought response in the Horn of Africa aimed to elicit the lived experiences of primary stakeholders in relation to the drought and the UNICEF response through adapting a “client/rights-holders journey” approach. A pilot programme in Yemen for young and emerging evaluators combines an evaluation learning curriculum with seats on reference groups for UNICEF evaluations, providing practical experience for them while strengthening the voices of youth in the evaluation process. In Malawi, UNICEF developed an innovative approach using performing arts to disseminate evaluations through drama, songs and dances, which proved popular among diverse audiences. The approach was adopted by the National Planning Commission of Malawi to disseminate Malawi’s Vision 2063 plan. And in Papua New Guinea, UNICEF finalized an evaluation of the UNICEF Improving Access to Justice for Children and Women project with the active participation of children to reflect their views on their access to justice and legal empowerment. The evaluation informed the design of a new project within the context of key reforms of child-focused justice in Papua New Guinea that are compliant with international standards.

G. Partnerships

35. A number of strategic partnerships launched in 2021 and 2022 began to show concrete results in 2023. This includes the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition, a consortium of 46 United Nations agencies, as well as Member States and civil society organizations, dedicated to synthesizing evaluative evidence to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Co-led by UNICEF and the United Nations Development Programme, the Coalition launched its first product, a synthesis of the partnerships pillar (Sustainable Development Goal 17) at the SDG Summit in September, with high-level participation from Member States. In 2023,

strategic linkages were also enhanced with the new United Nations Sustainable Development Group System-Wide Evaluation Office, which aims to enhance evidence-informed decision-making across the United Nations system.

36. Under the auspices of the ongoing partnership between the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany and the UNICEF Evaluation Office, a new thematically focused project on strengthening evidence for adaptive social protection was launched in 2023 with the involvement of the UNICEF Programme Group, the UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, and the Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring. The purpose of the collaboration is to launch a holistic, joined-up evidence agenda to strengthen adaptive social protection systems and their role in improving child well-being and building the resilience of families and communities.

37. Through its evaluation capacity development activities, UNICEF built or strengthened its partnerships with stakeholders including the German Institute for Development Evaluation, International Development Evaluation Association, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Global Evaluation Initiative, National University of Singapore, National School of Government of South Africa, European University Institute, Abu Dhabi School of Government, Hertie School and Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation, among many others.

38. In the humanitarian space, UNICEF worked in partnership with the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in humanitarian action to update the criteria for humanitarian evaluations of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

39. UNICEF remains committed to inter-agency learning and standard-setting through UNEG, with staff involved in the vast majority of interest and working groups. UNICEF led the development of United Nations inter-agency guidance on the integration of humanitarian principles in evaluation, which was endorsed by UNEG in early 2024, and contributed to the forthcoming UNEG Guidance on the Integration of Gender Equality, Disability and Human Rights in Evaluation and UNEG Guidance on Evaluation Synthesis, to just cite a few examples.

40. UNICEF also remained a partner of choice in many broader evidence and evaluation partnerships, continuing to co-chair EvalSDGs; the Multi-Donor Learning Partnership for Development Impact¹ alongside the United States Agency for International Development; and the Campbell Collaboration's Children and Young Persons Wellbeing Coordinating Group. In 2023, UNICEF also continued as an Implementation Council member of the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges and became a Partnership Council member of the Global Evaluation Initiative² and a Governing Council member of the Alliance for Living Evidence.

H. Human resources

41. Significant progress was made in strengthening human resources at the decentralized level in 2023. Regional evaluation advisers are now in place in all seven UNICEF regions. In addition, there are 16 multi-country evaluation specialists and

¹ See www.mdip4dev.org. Current members include Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the United States Agency for International Development, the World Bank, the Wellcome Trust, the World Food Programme and UNICEF).

15 dedicated country evaluation specialists. At the same time, there is a need for enhanced human resources at the global level in order to meet the commitments of the function in light of the increasing demands placed upon it, particularly in the areas of humanitarian and institutional effectiveness evaluation and impact evaluation.

42. The Evaluation Office also worked with the Division of Human Resources to define areas of expertise and skills for the evaluation function. Once the process is complete (March 2024), staff members will be able to “map” themselves to the defined skills on Skills+, the UNICEF platform for skills mapping. This will provide the Evaluation Office a detailed picture of what skills are missing across the function and what opportunities can be built upon in order to ensure optimal alignment with the revised evaluation policy and the needs of the Strategic Plan.

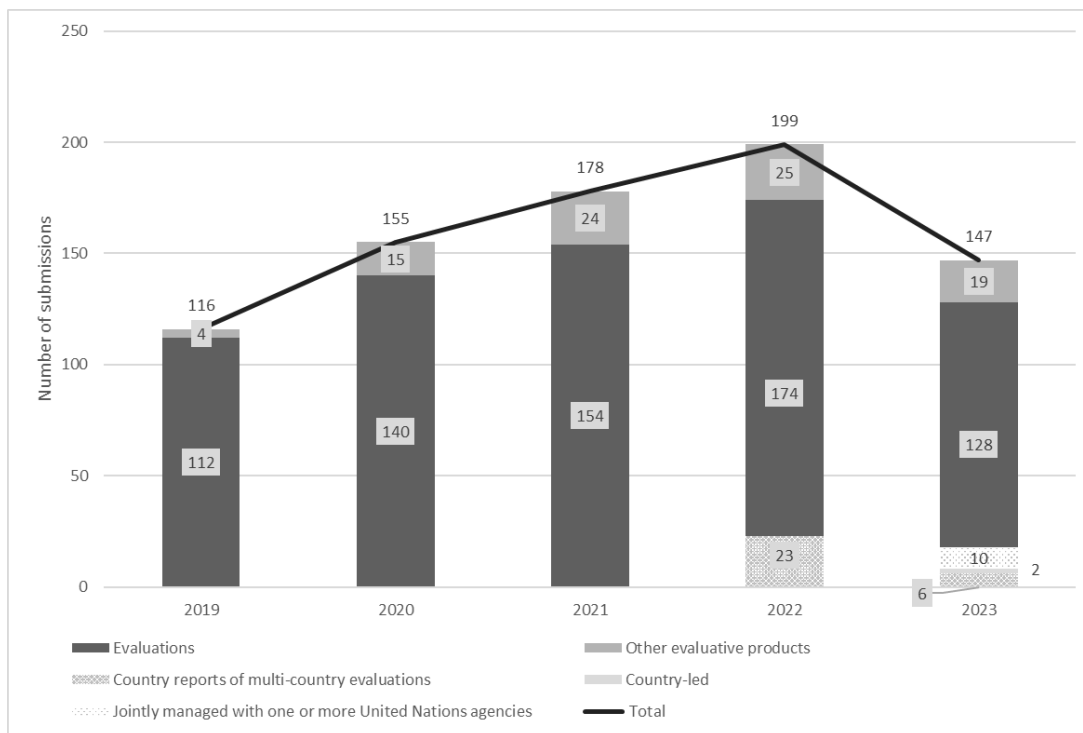
III. Performance overview: ongoing progress and key lessons for the evaluation function

A. Number of evaluation submissions and geographical coverage

43. In 2023, there was a decrease of about 26 per cent in the number of evaluation submissions. This is not in itself a negative trend if it signals a shift towards more strategic, high-quality evaluations. There were some positive signs that suggest this might be the case. For example, the number of evaluability assessments – a crucial quality assurance tool for ensuring good programme design – increased by 50 per cent in 2023. Better-designed programmes are key to better results, and thus it is encouraging to see the organization make greater use of this tool. Another positive trend involves the share of evaluations undertaken at the outcome level, which increased to 13 per cent in 2023 (compared with 10 per cent in 2022), as shown in figure II. The share of evaluations at the output and outcome levels also increased. Only 2 per cent of evaluations were undertaken exclusively at output level in 2023. These trends are not sufficient in themselves to demonstrate a shift towards more strategic evaluations, but they are encouraging.

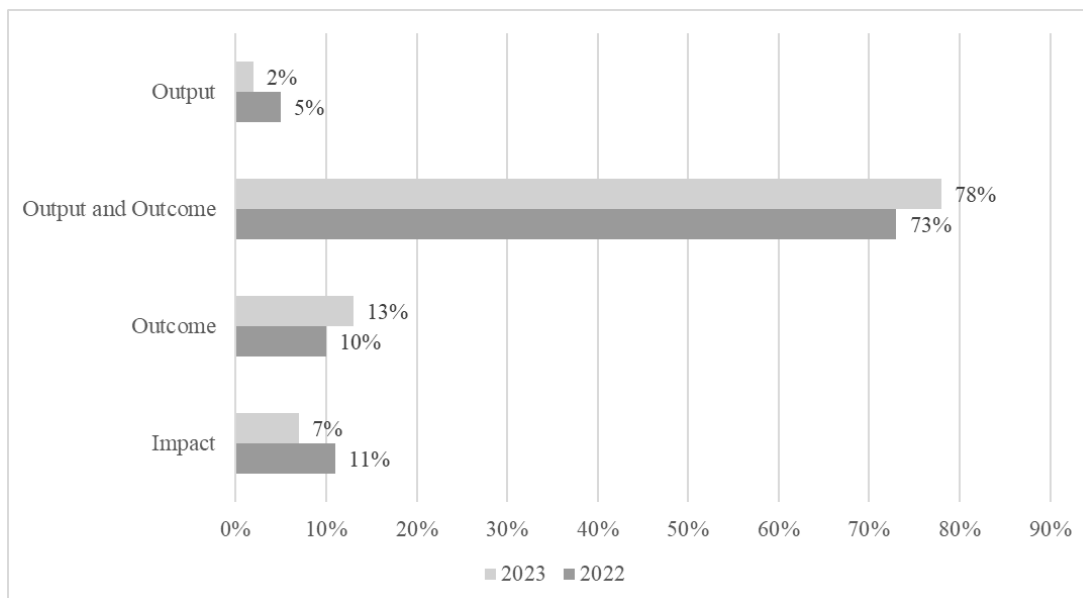
44. The trend line in figure I also shows the impact of guidance and tools developed by the Evaluation Office. The roll-out in 2021 of a suite of new methodological tools designed to allow the function to utilize a more diversified set of products resulted in a notable increase in submissions in 2021 and especially in 2022. In 2023, greater clarity on which types of analytical exercises fall within the definition of evaluation was provided, resulting in a tightening of the number of submissions, bringing it back to the approximate level of 2020.

Figure I
Number of evaluation submissions, 2019–2023



Source: Evidence Information Systems Integration (EISI) database.

Figure II
Evaluations by level and year, 2022 and 2023



Source: Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System (GEROS).

Table 1
**Number of evaluations and other evaluation products submitted, by location,
 2022 and 2023**

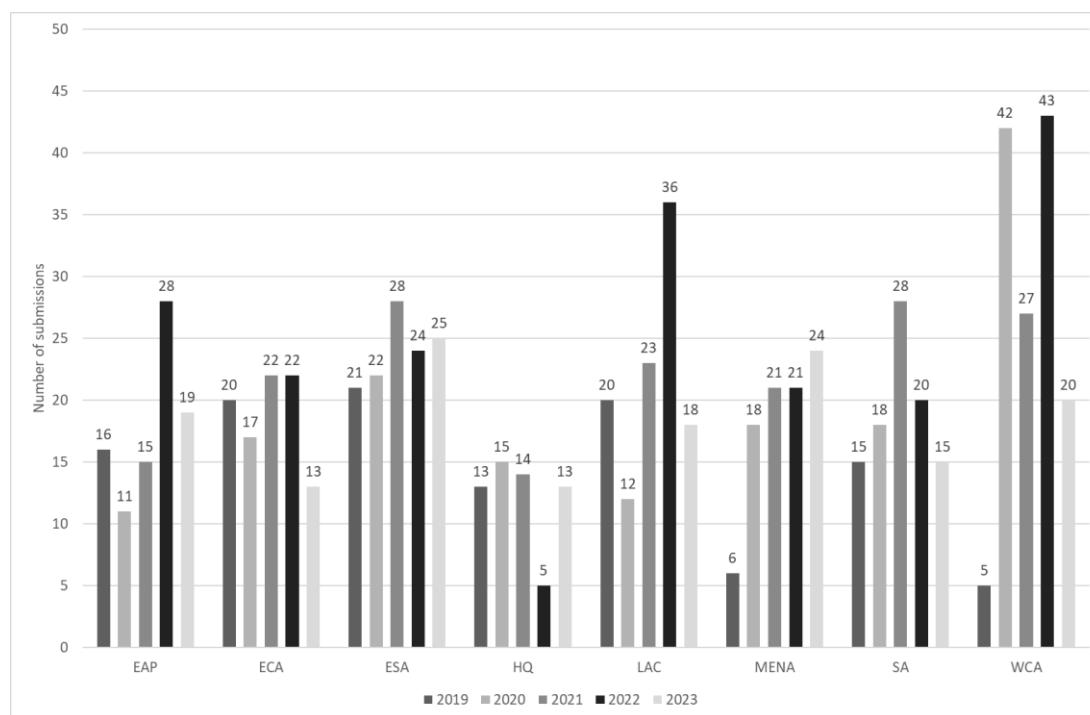
Location	Products submitted												Total	
	Evaluations		Of which, country-led	Of which, jointly managed with one or more United Nations agencies	Of which, country reports of multi-country evaluations	Evaluability assessments		Real-time assessments		Other (includes baseline assessment, review)				
	2022	2023	2023	2023	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023	
EAP	23	13	2	1	1	2	5	3	1	0	0	28	19	
ECA	16	11	0	1	0	3	2	3	0	0	0	22	13	
ESA	24	24	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	24	25	
HQ	4	11	0	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	5	13	
LAC	27	17	0	0	2	0	1	9	0	0	0	36	18	
MENA	21	21	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	21	24	
SA	18	14	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	20	15	
WCA	41	17	0	1	2	2	3	0	0	0	0	43	20	
Total	174	128	2	10	6	10	15	15	1	0	3	199	147	

Legend: EAP: East Asia and the Pacific; ECA: Europe and Central Asia; ESA: Eastern and Southern Africa; HQ: headquarters; LAC: Latin America and Caribbean; MENA: Middle East and North Africa; SA: South Asia; WCA: West and Central Africa.

Source: EISI database.

45. Figure III shows a more detailed breakdown of evaluation submissions by region, revealing a mixed picture. The number of submissions decreased in four regions (East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, South Asia, and West and Central Africa) and increased in three (Eastern and Southern Africa, headquarters, and Middle East and North Africa). The most significant increase was at headquarters, reflecting efforts by the Evaluation Office to move forward on delayed evaluations while advancing on its commitments under the plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025. This also reflects the calling forward of additional funding from the outer years of the quadrennium provided under the Evaluation Pooled Fund. At the regional level, the most significant decrease was in the West and Central Africa region. This may reflect, in part, the transition of the regional evaluation adviser position, which remained vacant for much of 2023 – an issue that affected four of seven regions in 2023, possibly contributing to lower submission numbers. Another factor explaining lower submission rates in 2023 was the unusually high number of submissions in 2022, which, as noted above, marked a period of especially high use of “other” evaluation products such as case studies, multi-country rapid assessments and evaluability assessments.

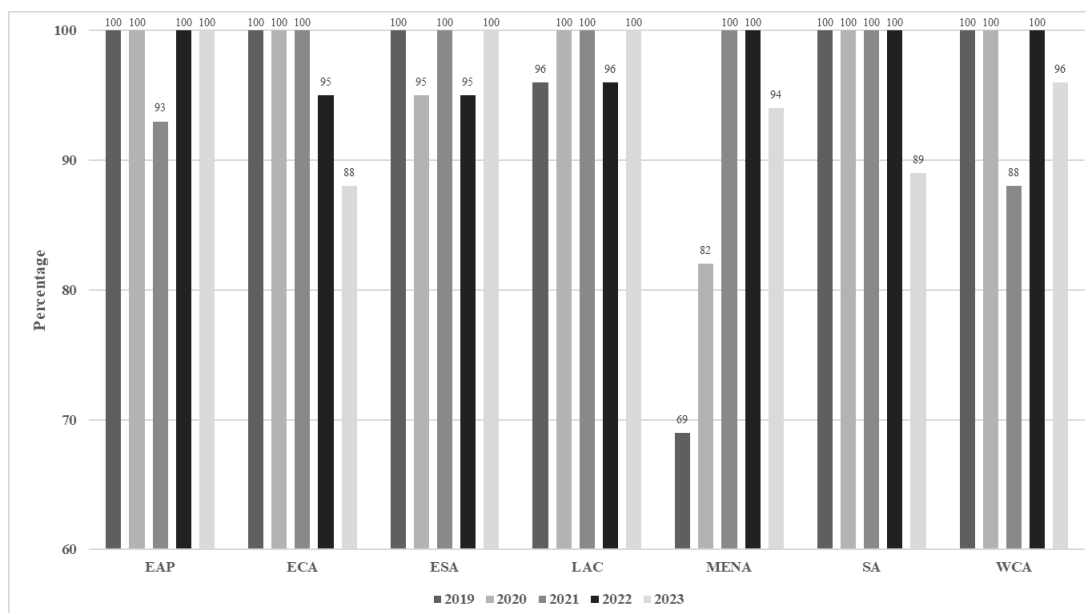
Figure III
Number of evaluation product submissions at decentralized level by location, 2019–2023



Legend: EAP: East Asia and the Pacific; ECA: Europe and Central Asia; ESA: Eastern and Southern Africa; HQ: headquarters; LAC: Latin America and Caribbean; MENA: Middle East and North Africa; SA: South Asia; WCA: West and Central Africa.
Source: EISI database.

46. Figure IV expresses evaluation submission numbers in terms of overall geographical coverage (country and regional offices that have conducted an evaluation in the past three years). Three of the seven regions achieved 100 per cent coverage (East Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, and Latin America and Caribbean), while coverage declined in the Europe and Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and West and Central Africa regions. The Evaluation Office has conducted an analysis of where the gaps are at country level and will follow up accordingly. In this connection, it is notable that 26 country offices with programme budgets exceeding \$10 million did not submit any evaluations in 2023; of those, nearly one third had programme budgets exceeding \$50 million.

Figure IV
Evaluation coverage rates, by region, 2019–2023



Legend: EAP: East Asia and the Pacific; ECA: Europe and Central Asia; ESA: Eastern and Southern Africa; HQ: headquarters; LAC: Latin America and Caribbean; MENA: Middle East and North Africa; SA: South Asia; WCA: West and Central Africa.

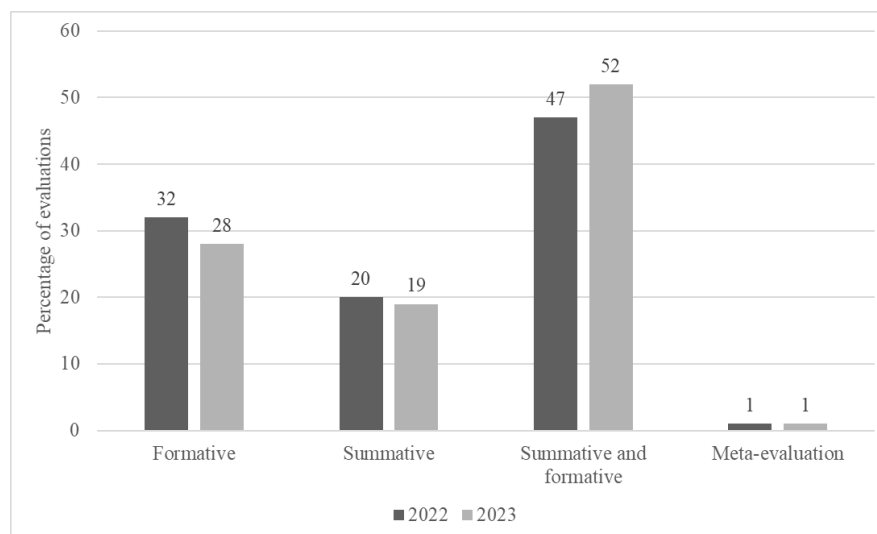
Source: EISI database.

B. Evaluation profile

47. The overall coverage of UNICEF programme interventions with impact evaluations that rigorously assess the effectiveness of innovative and scalable interventions remained low. In total, 4 per cent of all evaluations were produced with credible counterfactual design in 2023, all at the decentralized level (in Argentina, Lebanon, Mexico, Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania). While in previous years, social protection dominated the thematic distribution of impact evaluation evidence, in 2023, four of the five impact evaluations conducted were related to education. The Evaluation Office continued to work towards strengthened capacity to conduct more robust impact evaluations across the evaluation function.

48. Evaluations produced in 2023 continued to show a well-balanced mix of backwards-looking (summative) and forward-looking (formative) exercises, though with fewer exclusively formative exercises, as shown in figure V. More than half (52 per cent) of evaluations were both summative and formative, while 28 per cent were exclusively formative. Nineteen per cent were purely summative, and there was one meta-evaluation.

Figure V
Percentage of evaluations conducted in 2022 and 2023, by type

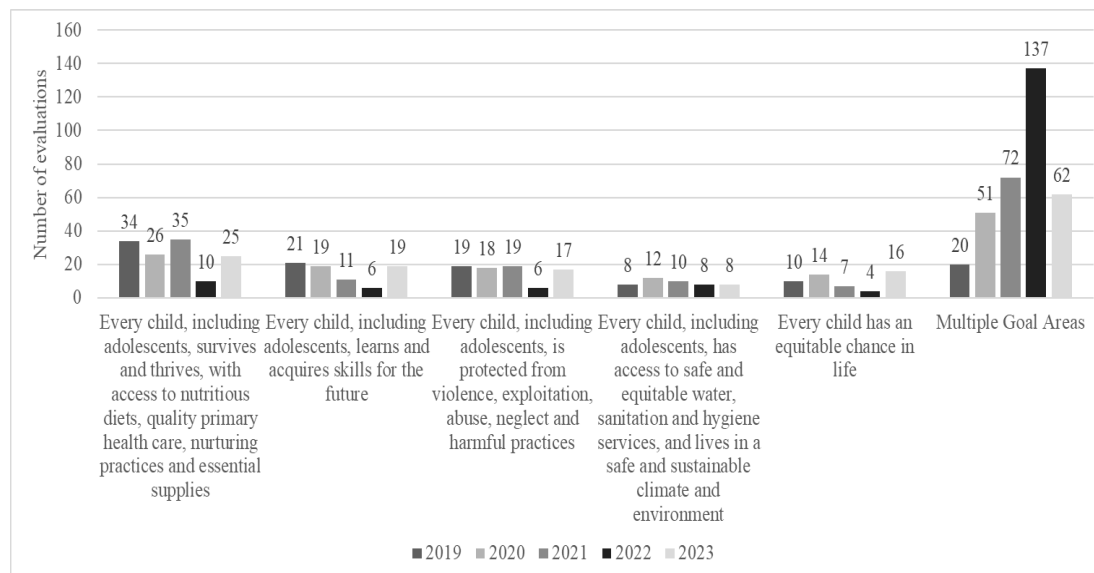


Source: GEROS.

1. Goal Area distribution

49. Thematic coverage of evaluations was also well balanced in 2023, as shown in figures VI and VII.

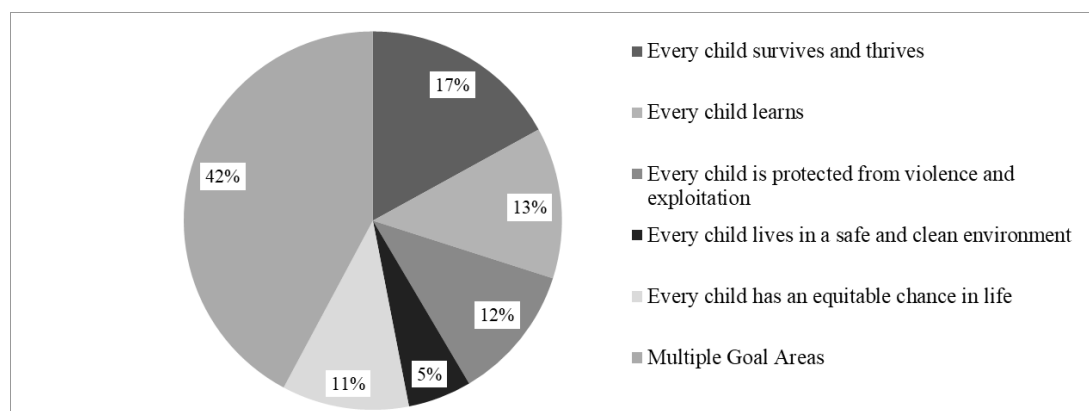
Figure VI
Thematic coverage of evaluations, 2019–2023^a



^a The Goal Areas in the previous UNICEF Strategic Plan were slightly different: 1. Every child survives and thrives; 2. Every child learns; 3. Every child is protected from violence and exploitation; 4. Every child lives in a safe and clean environment; 5. Every child has an equitable chance in life.

Source: EISI database.

Figure VII
Goal Area distribution, 2023



Source: EISI database.

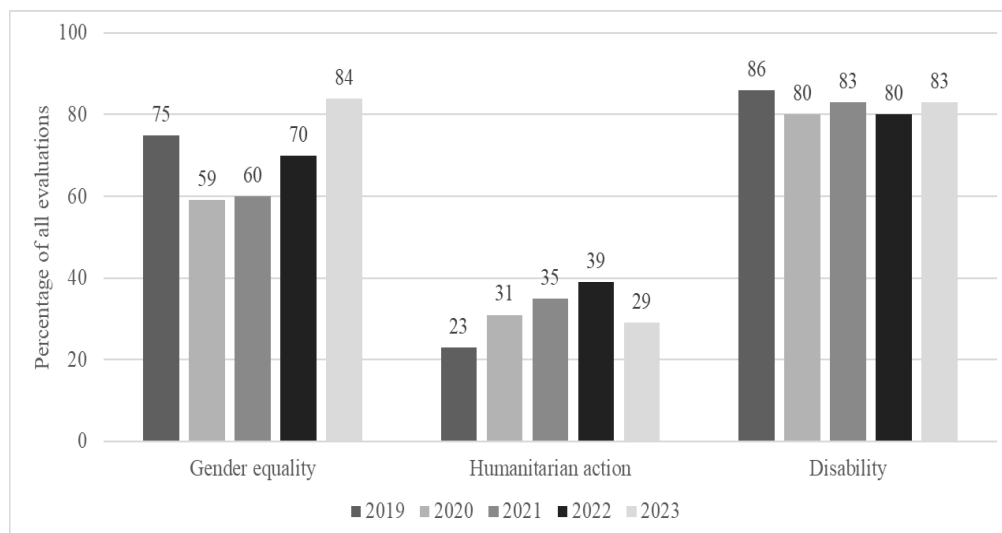
2. Joint, inter-agency and country-led evaluations

50. There were three country-led evaluations in 2023, covering primary education (Solomon Islands), early childhood (Philippines) and child protection systems (Belize). In addition, there were 10 evaluations managed jointly with one or more sister United Nations agencies; these included, among others, a joint evaluation, with UNFPA, of phase II of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage; a summative review, with the World Food Programme (WFP), of the UNICEF-WFP social protection response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Mozambique; a midterm evaluation, with UNFPA and WFP, of the United Nations Joint Programme on Girls' Education in Malawi; and the inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the COVID-19 humanitarian response.

3. Evaluation coverage of disability, gender equality and humanitarian action

51. UNICEF continued to make efforts in its evaluations to ensure coverage of disability, gender equality and humanitarian action. Disability coverage has remained relatively steady over the period covered by the evaluation policy of 2018, rising slightly to 81 per cent in 2023 from 80 per cent in 2022. Coverage of gender equality and the empowerment of women continued to improve, reaching a record high of 84 per cent in 2023, compared with 70 per cent in 2022, as shown in figure VIII.

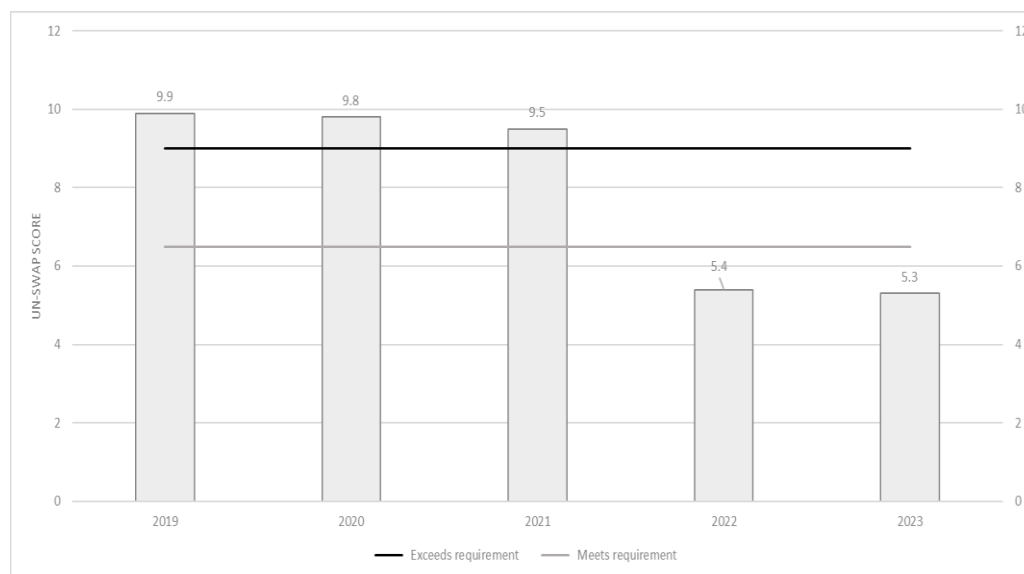
Figure VIII
Percentage of evaluations covering disability, gender equality and humanitarian action, 2019–2023



Source: GEROS.

52. At the same time, the organization’s performance under the United Nations System-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women remained below “meets requirement”, as shown in figure IX below.

Figure IX
Evaluation performance under the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2019–2023^a



^a Evaluation reports must have a minimum UN-SWAP score of 9 to reach “exceeds requirement” or 6.5 for “meets requirement”.

Source: GEROS.

53. Taken together, these two data points – greater coverage of gender, yet with low quality – suggest that while the function is making meaningful efforts to integrate a gender lens in UNICEF evaluations, its capacity to do so effectively requires strengthening. In 2023, an analysis was undertaken to understand the reasons behind this poor performance, and remedial actions were identified. Accordingly, the Evaluation Office will roll out refresher webinars in 2024 on the UNICEF Guidance

on Gender Integration in Evaluation (2019) and will continue to prioritize capacity-building of the evaluation function in this regard.

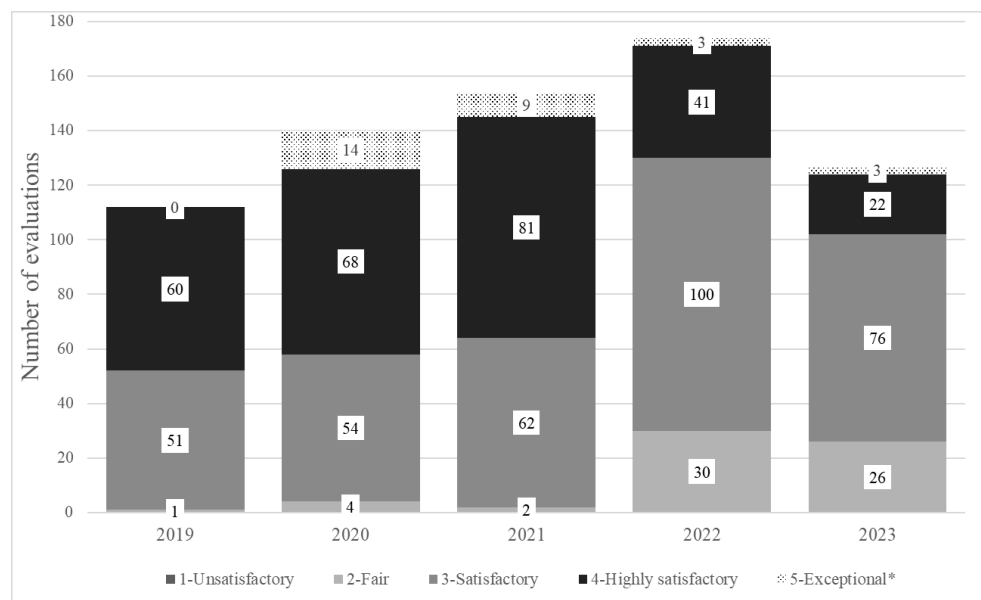
54. Evaluations of UNICEF humanitarian action in 2023 included 11 evaluations in countries involved in responding to Level 3 emergencies and 22 evaluations in countries involved in Level 2 emergencies. At headquarters level, three major humanitarian evaluations were completed in 2023 (Afghanistan, northern Ethiopia, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees-UNICEF evaluation of the Blueprint for Joint Action for Refugee Children), while three others were being finalized (Ukraine, Yemen and the thematic evaluation of the UNICEF approach to localization). In addition, evaluations of three Level 3 emergencies (Haiti, the Horn of Africa and the Syrian Arab Republic/Türkiye) and two inter-agency humanitarian evaluations (scale-up of Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic/Türkiye) were launched.

C. Evaluation quality

55. Overall, evaluation quality remained relatively consistent in 2023 compared with 2022. Of the 127 evaluations that were independently assessed by an external firm using GEROS, 2 per cent were rated “exceptional”, the same percentage as in 2022; 18 per cent were “highly satisfactory”, compared with 24 per cent in 2022; and 59 per cent were “satisfactory”, compared with 57 per cent in 2022. Twenty per cent of evaluations were rated “fair”, compared with 17 per cent in 2022. No evaluation received a grade of “unsatisfactory”, a positive trend that has continued since 2017. The mean and median scores of evaluation quality ratings remained the same as in 2022, with a mean score of 3 (compared with 3.13 in 2022) and a median score of 3 (the same number as in 2022).

Figure X

Overall evaluation quality ratings, 2019–2023



* The “exceptional” category was introduced in the 2020 cycle following a GEROS review.
Source: GEROS.

56. As noted in the annual report of 2022, the change in quality ratings in 2022 can partly be attributed to the more rigorous application of the assessment framework in GEROS, which began in 2022 and which the function is still becoming accustomed to. However, a deeper dive into the root causes of specific quality issues is required, and this will be undertaken in 2024. Improving evaluation quality is a priority under

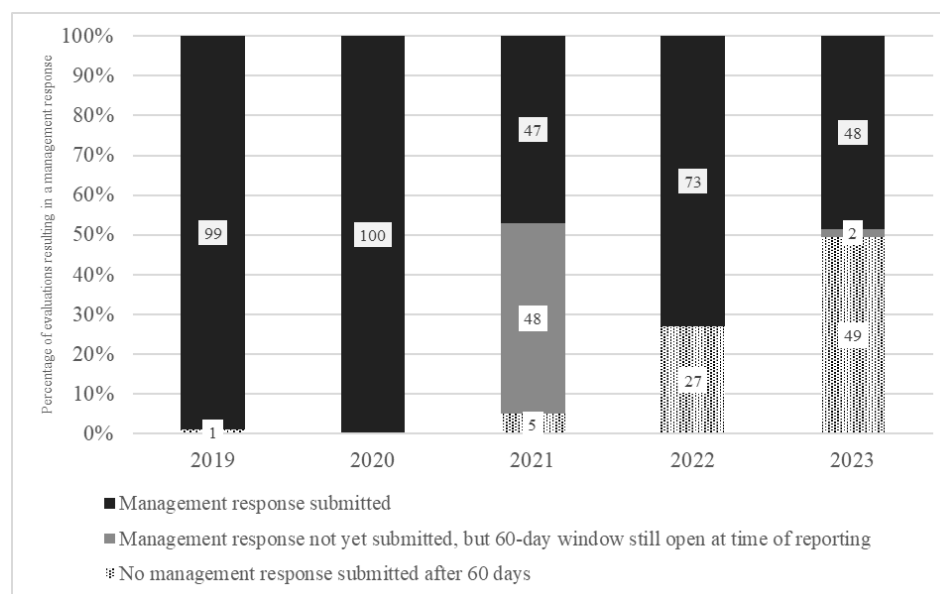
the revised evaluation policy, and improved quality control by the Evaluation Office will be key in this regard. In 2024, the Office will seek to enhance support to the decentralized evaluation function, including through internal trainings, evaluation policy implementation guidance and a UNICEF evaluation handbook, among other activities.

D. Evaluation management response submission and implementation

57. Of the 127 evaluations conducted in 2023 that required a management response, 41 per cent were submitted on time. Twenty-five per cent of management responses have passed the 60-day window and are now overdue, a slight decline from 2022. Here again, a deeper dive into the root causes of overdue management responses is required. A potential contributing factor is the reinstatement in 2022 of the 60-day deadline for management responses; in the two years prior, management had 90 days to provide a response in recognition of challenges related to COVID-19.

Figure XI

Timeliness of compliance with management response requirement, 2019–2023^a

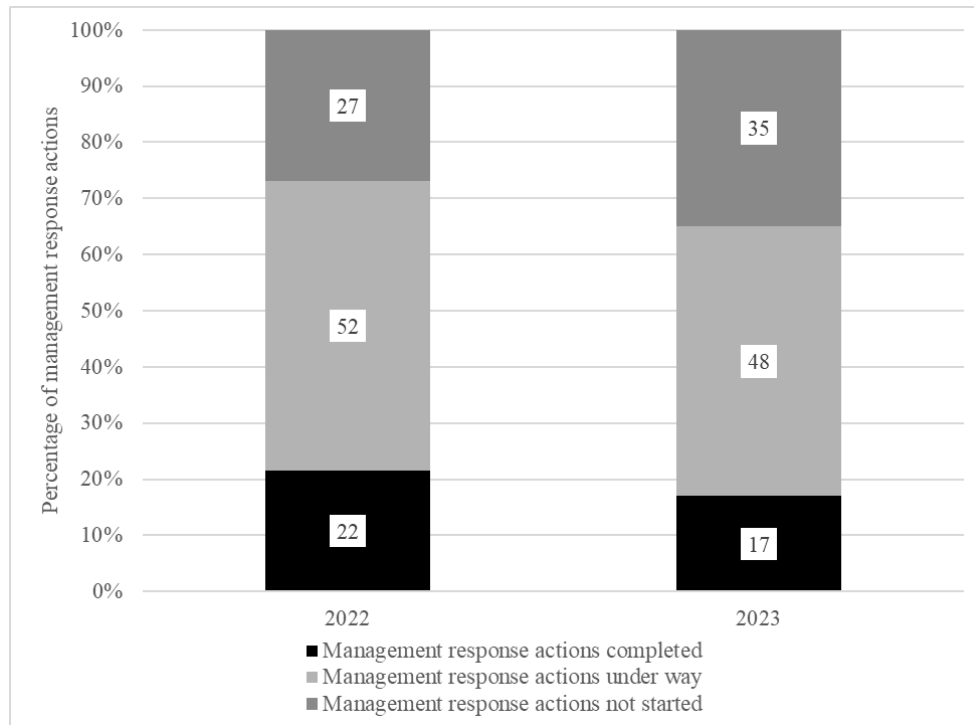


^a The time frame for submitting a management response was temporarily extended to 90 days in 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: EISI database.

58. There was a slight increase in the percentage of management response actions not started in 2023 (35) compared with 2022 (27). It is important to note that these numbers are cumulative year-on-year; thus, some management response actions overdue in 2022 may have carried over into 2023. Follow-up on these delayed management response actions will be a priority in 2024.

Figure XII
Implementation status of actions identified in management responses, 2022–2023

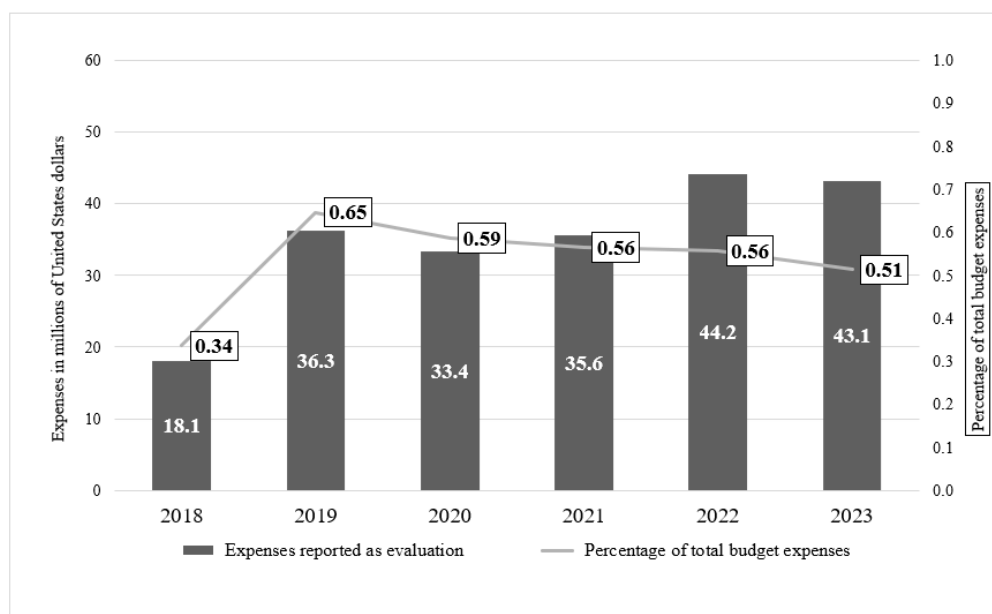


Source: EISI database.

E. Financial resources and expenditure reported as evaluation

59. Figure XIII shows trends in overall expenses reported as evaluation during this period, using the new formula jointly revised by the Evaluation Office and the Division of Finance, Administration and Management.

Figure XIII
UNICEF expenditure reported as evaluation, in millions of United States dollars and as a percentage of total expenses, 2018–2023^a



^a The bars and the amounts included inside show the expenditure reported as evaluation in millions of United States dollars for each year. The red line and numbers denote percentages of the total expenses reported as evaluation expenditure per year. Data for 2023 are preliminary.

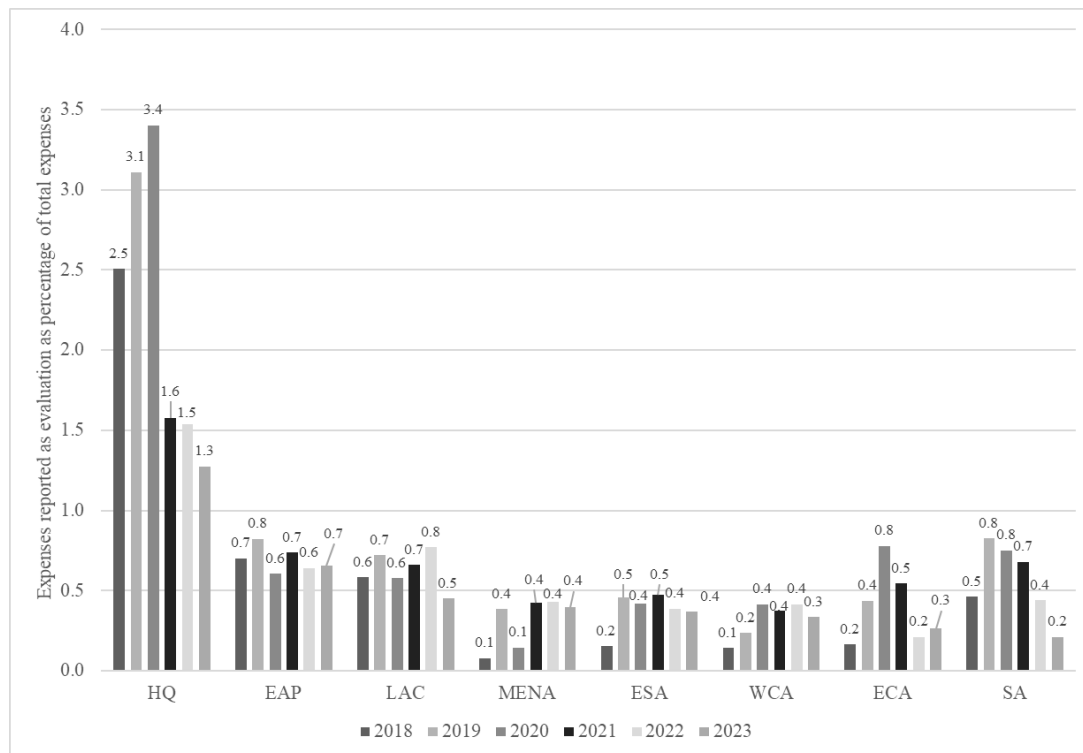
Source: Data for the numerator: expenses reported as evaluation retrieved on 11 March 2024; data for the denominator: total expenses retrieved on 11 March 2024. VISION Strategic Plan Analysis Cubes extracted on 11 March 2024.

60. Overall expenses for evaluation, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of expenses, declined in 2023 – the first time this has been seen with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic. Performance on expenses reported as evaluation declined to 0.51 per cent of overall expenses, continuing a trend of steadily reduced expenditure since 2019.

61. The trend varied between headquarters and the decentralized level, as shown in figure XIV.

62. Headquarters met the 1 per cent target, while the East Asia and the Pacific region came close, with 0.7 per cent of total expenses spent on activities reported as evaluations. All other regions were under the 0.5 per cent mark.

Figure XIV
Expenditure reported as evaluation as a percentage of total expenses, by region, 2018–2023



Legend: EAP: East Asia and the Pacific; ECA: Europe and Central Asia; ESA: Eastern and Southern Africa; HQ: headquarters; LAC: Latin America and Caribbean; MENA: Middle East and North Africa; SA: South Asia; WCA: West and Central Africa.

Source: Data for the numerator: expenses reported as evaluation retrieved on 11 March 2024; data for the denominator: total expenses retrieved on 11 March 2024. VISION Strategic Plan Analysis Cubes extracted on 11 March 2024.

Note: Headquarters expenditure includes resources that support the decentralized level, including some salaries.

63. As noted above, the strong performance at headquarters level is attributable in large part to the advancing of resources under the Evaluation Pooled Fund in the last quarter of 2023. This injection of funds toward year’s end enabled the Evaluation Office to get back on track and meet its commitments under the plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025, specifically by providing financial resources that could be committed to evaluations that, though funded in 2023, would subsequently start in the first quarter of 2024. This development, while positive, still leaves the organization as a whole falling short in terms of expenditure. In addition, an important caveat with regard to these figures is that they are extracted from the UNICEF Virtual Integrated System of Information (VISION) and based on self-reporting. As such, while they represent the best data available, they are likely to be slightly inflated, as evidenced by table 2, which shows that of the total expenses reported as evaluation in 2023, only 81.5 per cent was spent on evaluation activities, with the rest being erroneously coded.

Table 2
Activities reported as evaluation expenses, by activity type, 2023

Activities	Expenses (in United Stated dollars)	Percentage
Activities directly related to evaluation	35 163 181	81.5%
Data and surveys	1 546 505	3.6%
Planning and programme reviews	580 956	1.3%
Monitoring	935 320	2.2%
Research	185 091	0.4%
Evidence generation	372 498	0.9%
Systems strengthening	2 417 720	5.6%
Other	1 945 589	4.5%
Total	43 146 861	100.0%

Source: Activities reported as evaluation expenses retrieved on 11 March 2024.

64. In order to (a) remedy the gaps described above in terms of quality and use of evaluations and incorporation of gender and disability; (b) deliver on existing strategic commitments such as national evaluation capacity development and impact evaluation; and (c) respond to new and emerging organizational priorities, the evaluation function will require additional resources.

IV. Conclusions and way forward

65. Although performance on the key indicators established for the function exhibited a high degree of continuity with prevailing trends in 2023, from a broad strategic standpoint the year represented a positive turning point for the evaluation function. Most of the global evaluations delayed in 2022 were put back on track in 2023. More fundamentally, completion of an independent peer review of the function early in the year paved the way for a review and update of the evaluation policy. The revised evaluation policy resulting from this process makes several transformational shifts that aim to ensure that evaluation is optimally positioned to help UNICEF and its partners achieve ever-better results at scale for children in the years ahead.

66. Alongside the policy revision process, two specific areas with particularly high transformational potential were accelerated in 2023. First, the function significantly expanded its impact evaluation efforts, helping equip UNICEF and its partners to make the most prudent decisions about which interventions to invest in based on robust evidence of “what works” and what is most cost-effective. Second, the function significantly scaled up its national evaluation capacity development leadership role, both through continued technical trainings and, crucially, through innovative workshops at the higher strategic and political level (i.e. senior-level ministerial officials, senior civil servants and parliamentarians), where UNICEF has a strong comparative advantage and can help empower these stakeholders to be active partners in the learning and accountability agenda for children. Progress in these two areas stands to position the function for heightened positive impact for children in the years ahead.

67. Looking ahead to 2024 and beyond, the function will seek to sustain this positive momentum and focus on ensuring that the revised evaluation policy is implemented in a consistently robust manner throughout the organization. Towards this end, it will take action to:

(a) achieve consistency of practice through the development of a UNICEF evaluation handbook, procedural guidance and other means of integrating and

harmonizing the global function, and to strengthen the independence of the function at the decentralized level;

(b) develop more robust and streamlined evaluation planning processes to help ensure that evaluations are of the highest strategic priority wherever possible, while continuing to advocate for a more coherent and cohesive approach to donor-driven evaluations, with the potential result that fewer but more strategically significant evaluations will be generated in future;

(c) address the root causes of performance shortfalls identified through causal analysis in 2023, including through greater investment in frontier technologies as well as internal management measures, while also developing additional key performance indicators to be used in future reporting on the qualitative health and maturity of the function;

(d) adapt GEROS to ensure that it is fit for purpose in assessing the many other types of evaluative exercises covered by the revised policy, such as evaluability assessments and impact evaluations;

(e) strengthen uptake of evaluations through measures to ensure consistently high relevance, credibility and utility of evaluations at all levels of the organization, through institutionalized means of incorporating evaluations into key decision-making process, through better-targeted communications to more clearly convey evaluation takeaways, and through efforts to reduce the organization's evaluation absorption burden (e.g. by closing out long-outdated recommendations and by completing evaluation syntheses that elevate recurring recommendations to management's attention);

(f) expand and consolidate the gains that have been made in impact evaluation and national evaluation capacity development, and develop a longer-term sustainability plan for both initiatives;

(g) reorganize the Evaluation Office to ensure that it is as fit for purpose as possible to successfully achieve these other objectives and to better support the function across all levels of the organization; and

(h) continue to enhance linkages to other stakeholders at all levels of the organization which share responsibility for the function, with a view to ensuring uniformly high and meaningful implementation, strengthening the enabling environment for the function, and fostering a strong culture of evaluation and other forms of evidence.

68. These efforts will be aided by a policy implementation strategy, rooted in the significantly revamped theory of change included in the revised policy, to be developed in the first half of 2024. The ability to successfully complete these transformational activities, and thereby fulfil the aspiration for the "next-generation" evaluation function envisaged in the revised evaluation policy, will, however, require a more sustainable solution to ensure the adequate and predictable evaluation resourcing of the function.

69. Since much of the strengthening of the function will need to be at the decentralized level, resourcing solutions will need to be found at two levels. First, low overall expenditure on evaluation at the decentralized level needs to be addressed. Measures undertaken in 2023 to strengthen linkages between the Evaluation Office and regional offices set the stage for concrete progress in this area in 2024.

70. Second, since much of the strengthening at the decentralized level requires intensified efforts at the headquarters level to bring greater consistency of practice, independence and performance across the function, additional resources will be required to strengthen internal systems in the ways described above – and to enable the Evaluation Office to continue meeting its commitments to the Executive Board as

per the plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025. Towards this end, analyses undertaken in 2023 and carrying over into 2024 have allowed the Evaluation Office to pinpoint those areas requiring remedial action and identify the corresponding resource requirements to address them in 2024 and 2025. In addition, the ability to complete all evaluation commitments made in the plan for global evaluations and to support the evaluation plans of lesser-resourced country offices will depend on sufficient replenishment of the Evaluation Pooled Fund, which has now been depleted, to an annual level of \$13 million (\$50 million for the current quadrennium, and the same level revised upward in the next quadrennium, should total expenses managed by the organization continue to increase).

71. If provided, these additional resources will ensure that the function can deliver on its existing learning and accountability commitments while also enabling it to position evaluation for maximum positive impact for children, as envisaged in the revised policy. Moving forward, the evaluation function will continue doing its part to monitor and report on evaluation expenditure, including at the decentralized level, so that management can take the necessary corrective actions.

V. Draft decision

The Executive Board

1. *Takes note* of the annual report for 2023 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2024/20](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2024/21](#));
 2. *Also takes note* of the evaluation of UNICEF approaches to advocacy, its summary ([E/ICEF/2024/22](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2024/23](#));
 3. *Further takes note* of the evaluation of UNICEF investments towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change, its summary ([E/ICEF/2024/24](#)) and its *management* response ([E/ICEF/2024/25](#)).
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