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**For decision**

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## United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

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Item 10 of the provisional agenda\*

### **Management response to the annual report for 2023 on the evaluation function in UNICEF**

#### *Summary*

In accordance with Executive Board decision 2013/13, the present document provides the management response to the annual report for 2023 on the evaluation function in UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2024/20](#)). The management response addresses the key elements of the annual report, including the progress of the evaluation function on key performance indicators and the implementation of the revised evaluation policy of UNICEF ([E/ICEF/2023/27](#) and [E/ICEF/2023/27/Corr.1](#)).

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

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

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

## I. Overview

1. This management response has been prepared by the management of UNICEF in response to the annual report for 2023 on the evaluation function in UNICEF (E/ICEF/2024/20). It comments on progress within the evaluation function in 2023 in light of the forward-looking ambitions of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 and the revised evaluation policy of UNICEF (E/ICEF/2023/27 and E/ICEF/2023/27/Corr.1).

2. Management commends the function on evaluations published in 2023 and the increase in outcome-focused evaluations. It welcomes initiatives in impact evaluation and national evaluation capacity development, and reaffirms its commitment to the use of high-quality evaluations. Looking forward, management welcomes the reinforced evaluation capacity at the decentralized level, the innovation in evaluation approaches and tools, and the establishment of the Impact Catalyst Fund.

## II. Background and key developments

### A. Operational context

3. Management notes the increasing demand on the evaluation function from an unprecedented number of complex emergencies requiring a corporate Level 3 response in 2023, and the likely continued high requirements for humanitarian evaluations. Alongside this challenging backdrop, however, management welcomes the recognition of a significant increase in “demand-driven” evaluations – that is, evaluations requested by stakeholders rather than being commissioned by the evaluation function itself. This reflects the continued organizational commitment to evaluation, and in particular the increased emphasis on using evidence about the key enablers and change strategies to inform course corrections.

4. Management also welcomes the strengthening of dedicated human resources for evaluation at the decentralized level, and highlights the importance of maximizing synergies in the skills available to country offices across the evidence functions. It further notes the complementarity between organizational investment in national statistical and other data systems, and the work of the evaluation function to advance impact- and outcome-level evaluations.

5. Management welcomes the strengthening of decentralized human resources and corporate evaluations that were delivered in 2023. Management recognizes that further work is needed to ensure that offices increase the use of other resources to meet their obligations to deliver effective evaluations, and promotes regional and country offices to work with the Evaluation Office in achieving this objective.<sup>1</sup> In a context of a shrinking share of regular resources and overall increases in programme expenditure, management recognizes the significant operational challenges faced in achieving predictable levels of funding for the evaluation function. Management particularly notes that the revised and tightened formula for evaluation financing only counts actual expenditure (not commitments) in reporting to the Executive Board, and that efficient and timely delivery of credible and useful evaluations is essential to meet policy targets.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, management recalls decision 2022/25 of the Executive Board on the importance of sufficient and predictable regular resources for UNICEF to be able to deliver on the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 while maintaining robust internal control and accountability systems.

<sup>2</sup> The annual review of the evaluation function calculates expenditure on evaluation based on “actual expenditure”. Accounting for “utilization” (including firm commitments), as was formerly reported before 2022, equates to a 0.82 per cent expenditure on evaluation in 2023.

## **B. Key developments in the evaluation function**

### **1. Strategy and vision**

6. Management congratulates the evaluation function on the launch of the revised evaluation policy of UNICEF, which was endorsed by the Executive Board at its second regular session of 2023. It looks forward to contributing to the forthcoming implementation strategy, guidance note, procedure and handbook to support the policy.

7. The annual report for 2023 on the evaluation function in UNICEF notes the critical role of regional directors in implementing the evaluation policy, and management is pleased to note the partnerships that have been established with the Director of Evaluation in a matrix management of the regional evaluation advisers.

8. Management welcomes the articulation of a revised formula for calculating evaluation expenditure, and new tools for tracking financial information on evaluation expenditure by managers at all levels of UNICEF.

### **2. Noteworthy evaluations**

9. Management appreciates the evaluations that were produced by the Evaluation Office in 2023, including the baseline assessment of UNICEF environmental and social safeguards implementation, the evaluation of UNICEF investment towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change, and the humanitarian evaluations of Level 3 responses including in Afghanistan, northern Ethiopia and Ukraine.

10. Management is particularly pleased to note the significant increase in outcome-level evaluations relating to the Goal Areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, and welcomes the development of new guidance for systematically integrating a climate lens into UNICEF evaluations.

### **3. Impact evaluation**

11. Management welcomes the successful launch of the Impact Catalyst Fund, to support high-quality impact evaluations in priority thematic areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. It looks forward to reviewing the evidence generated by the first two rounds covering child marriage and social norms, and adaptive social protection.

12. The outcome-level evaluations of the UNICEF response to Level 3 emergencies in Afghanistan and Ukraine are notable in their innovative use of evidence supported by the UNICEF Planning, Monitoring, Data and Analytics function, such as UNICEF programme data, and national mobile phone and household surveys. Management strongly encourages this joined-up approach to maximize the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the evidence functions.

### **4. National evaluation capacity development**

13. Strengthening national systems is a central tenet of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025, and management recognizes the strong contribution of the evaluation function in the area of strengthening national evaluation capacity. In particular, General Assembly resolution [77/283](#), on strengthening voluntary national reviews through country-led evaluation, is an important milestone in strengthening the use of evaluation evidence in voluntary national reviews.

14. Management welcomes the concrete action plans for national evaluation capacity development activities prepared by 58 country delegations that completed the Executive Course for Evaluation Leaders (ExCEL). The multilingual support of ExCEL is particularly welcomed. Management also extends its congratulations and appreciation to the 300 government participants and other partners that participated in the 10 cohorts of the online Intermediate Moderated Programme for Evaluation Systems Strengthening (IMPrESS). Together, these learning platforms will continue to play a critical role in the contribution of the evaluation function in supporting development effectiveness.

15. The country-led evaluations on education in South Africa and the Solomon Islands are particularly welcomed, and management encourages the function to support more country-led work of this type. Management also recognizes the important work completed in elaborating national evaluation policies and monitoring and evaluation frameworks in Bangladesh, Lesotho and Nigeria, and the first-ever evaluation forum in the Dominican Republic. The partnership between the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results and the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office, and the road map for supporting national evaluation capacity by the Regional Office for South Asia are important examples of the commitment to supporting national evaluation capacity.

## **5. Innovations**

16. Management is acutely aware that the UNICEF evaluation function, like all of the evidence functions, is impacted by advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), and the growing need for cost-effective, responsible and timely analytics. The exploration of potential applications of AI analytics in various evaluation tasks is timely and welcomed. Moving forward, management sees commonality in the analytical needs and the ethical implications of AI across the evidence functions, and expects to see strong coordination in this area so as to maximize investments, promote cross-functional learning and ensure proper safeguarding.

17. The effort to produce more evaluation synthesis and the evaluation evidence “gap map” is an important and welcomed initiative. Management looks forward to working closely with the Evaluation Office to further refine and strengthen the quality, completeness and utility of evaluation syntheses. Management welcomes the joint work with other United Nations agencies to inform the work of key intergovernmental forums including the annual SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future events.

18. Management is pleased to note the work undertaken in the Horn of Africa, Malawi and Yemen evaluations to engage young people and primary rights holders as sources of knowledge, evaluators and users of evaluation findings.

## **6. Partnerships**

19. Management congratulates the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition, co-led by UNICEF, in presenting its first product, a synthesis of the partnerships pillar (Sustainable Development Goal 17). It also appreciates the leadership contribution of the evaluation function in the Multi-Donor Learning Partnership for Development Impact, the Campbell Collaboration’s Children and Young Persons Wellbeing Coordinating Group, and the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges.

20. Management welcomes the cross-organizational work on strengthening evidence for adaptive social protection supported by the ongoing partnership between

the Evaluation Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany.

## **7. Human resources**

21. Management firmly welcomes the significant progress made in 2023 in strengthening human resources at the decentralized level, and the leadership contribution that the full complement of seven regional evaluation advisers, 16 multi-country evaluation specialists and 15 dedicated country evaluation specialists are playing in implementing the evaluation policy at the decentralized level. In particular, management encourages the evaluation function to leverage this considerable investment in human resources to address some of the challenges in quality that have been reported in the last two annual reports of the evaluation function.

# **III. Performance of the evaluation function**

## **A. Number and coverage of evaluations**

22. Management takes note of the reduction in the total number of evaluation products from 199 in 2022 to 147 in 2023, while keeping in mind that the implementation of policy commitments and the use of better-quality evaluations are more important than the absolute number. The amount of evaluation work completed in 2023 continues to illustrate the value and commitment that UNICEF places on the evaluation function at all levels.

23. Management is particularly pleased to note that the percentage of evaluations covering the outcome or impact levels has risen to 98 per cent, reflecting a more strategic function than in past years. The 91 per cent of evaluations that cover the outcome level is particularly notable given the outcome focus of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. This is also likely to have an impact on the complexity of evaluation recommendations and the time needed to implement them, which is reflected in data presented on the management response.

24. The drop in overall geographical coverage of evaluations to 84 per cent is of concern to management. While management is aware of specific access and political constraints that some evaluations of humanitarian action are currently facing, ensuring full coverage according to the evaluation policy must be a priority in the year ahead.

## **B. Scope of evaluations, including impact and contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals**

25. The stronger focus of the evaluation function on learning, illustrated by the 80 per cent of evaluations with a formative element in 2023, is welcomed by management. The balanced thematic coverage and high proportion of cross-sectoral coverage in evaluations is also appreciated. As noted above, management particularly appreciates the two country-led evaluations and 10 joint evaluations with other United Nations agencies.

26. While management recognizes the strong strategic commitment of the evaluation function to impact evaluation, it also notes that only 4 per cent of evaluations were produced with credible counterfactual design in 2023. Nevertheless, the expanded thematic coverage of this limited set is welcomed.

27. Management takes keen note of both the coverage of disability and gender by evaluations, and the quality of that coverage. It agrees with the conclusion of the annual report that while the evaluation function is making meaningful efforts to

integrate a gender lens in UNICEF evaluations, its capacity to do so effectively is insufficient. Management is particularly concerned about the decline in the organization's performance regarding the evaluation indicator under the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and calls on the Evaluation Office to prioritize its plans to strengthen the evaluation function in that regard.

### **C. Evaluation quality**

28. Management notes with concern the reduction in evaluation quality that was recorded in 2023. Despite this slight overall decline, management commends that, once again, no evaluation report was rated as unsatisfactory quality. Management continues to welcome the additional scrutiny of evaluation quality and the commitment of the Evaluation Office to timely independent assessment of evaluation reports.

29. Management looks forward to seeing the reinforced independence of the evaluation function at the decentralized level lead to better-quality evaluation reports in the year ahead. It is particularly notable that the two lowest-scoring criteria for report quality are "recommendations" and "evaluation principles", which both declined in 2023. These aspects of evaluation reports are essential to the effective use of evaluations by management.

### **D. Evaluation use, including management responses**

30. Management commends the participatory planning approach of the evaluation function, which is a prerequisite for ownership and use of evaluative evidence. While remaining cognizant of the above questions on the inconsistent quality of evaluation report recommendations, management reiterates the importance of timely implementation of evaluation management responses. The timeliness of preparing management responses in 2023 was below expectations, although the annual report recognizes that there may still be some adjustment to the reinstigation of the 60-day window and, as noted above, the increasing outcome focus of evaluations may be contributing to a need for more comprehensive responses.

31. Management concurs that a deeper dive into the root causes of overdue management responses is required, and looks forward to working with the Evaluation Office to complete that review. Management also notes the continuing inconsistency across regions in the timely completion of agreed actions and agrees that follow-up on those delayed management response actions should be a priority in 2024.

### **E. Strategic financing of the evaluation function**

32. Management notes that, as expected, the revised and tightened formula for counting evaluation expenditure records a reduction in counted expenditure for evaluation in 2023, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of programme expenditure. It is noted that headquarters exceeded the 1 per cent target, at 1.3 per cent, but that challenges at the decentralized level remain. Management is pleased to note that the annual report found that the 2018 Evaluation Pooled Fund had a catalytic effect on overall investment in evaluation, as intended.

33. As noted in previous years, in a context of severely declining regular resources, management observes that the difference between the actual and targeted spend on evaluation cannot be made up from allocations of regular resources alone, which already account for 2 per cent of evaluation expenditures, while other resources

account for less than 0.5 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Management looks forward to working with all stakeholders, including the decentralized evaluation function, to ensure that evaluation is properly budgeted in proposals for other resources, including other resources (emergency).

34. Concurrently, management recognizes that high-quality household survey data is a critical input to the evaluation function, particularly given the trend and commitment towards more impact and outcome evaluations. To this end, management recalls that UNICEF invested \$14.33 million on multiple indicator cluster surveys in 2023, feeding high-quality impact data to the evaluation function that would not otherwise be available without individual evaluations incurring significant additional costs. Combined with recorded expenditure on evaluation, this represents over 0.68 per cent of overall programme expenditure and demonstrates the joint commitment across UNICEF to stronger impact evidence. Management notes that the evaluation policy provides the Director of Evaluation discretion to include such evidence activities within the calculation of evaluation expenditure,<sup>4</sup> which could further encourage countries to support high-quality data collection that is essential to impact and outcome evaluations.

## IV. Conclusions

35. Management commends the notable increase in evaluations covering outcome or impact levels reflecting a more strategic approach aligned with the organization's goals, although management notes the need to recover rates of geographical coverage. Management welcomes the strides made in learning-focused evaluations and thematic coverage but emphasizes the need for stronger integration of gender perspectives.

36. Despite a slight decline in evaluation quality, the trend of no unsatisfactory reports has continued since 2017, and management supports further efforts to enhance the quality of reports, especially with regard to the quality of recommendations and application of evaluation principles. Timely implementation of management responses remains a priority, with management supporting plans for deeper analysis of delays and improved follow-up actions. Recalling the organizational commitment to a coherent evidence function, as noted in the management response to the evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 (E/ICEF/2023/4), management welcomes the increase in demand-led evaluations and the synergistic investments in high-quality household survey data that enable the shift to impact- and outcome-level evaluations.

37. Management applauds the launch of the revised evaluation policy of UNICEF and looks forward to supporting its implementation. Noteworthy evaluations have provided valuable insights, particularly those focusing on outcome levels. The establishment of the Impact Catalyst Fund and efforts in national evaluation capacity development reflect a commitment to evidence-based decision-making and strengthening evaluation systems globally.

38. Management acknowledges the challenges posed by rapid advancements in technology but welcomes initiatives to leverage AI, and to produce more synthesis reports. Collaborations with other United Nations agencies and partners have enhanced the influence and effectiveness of UNICEF, while investments in human

<sup>3</sup> This underscores Executive Board decision 2022/20, in which the Board expressed “concern with the current lower level and trend of declining voluntary contributions to regular resources”.

<sup>4</sup> As noted in the revised evaluation policy of UNICEF, “the activities of other evidence functions must be financed separately from evaluation, unless exceptionally authorized by the Director of Evaluation – that is, in the case where such efforts directly complement planned evaluation efforts.”

resources at decentralized levels will improve the quality of evaluations. Overall, these efforts underscore the commitment of UNICEF to maximizing its development and humanitarian effectiveness through evidence-driven approaches and a high-quality evaluation function.

## 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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