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Evaluation of UNICEF investments towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change

Summary[**]

Summary

Social and behaviour change (SBC) is an approach that applies the social and behavioural sciences to understand the needs of individuals and communities in order to develop context-specific, people-centred solutions for the barriers that impede positive change. In recent years, UNICEF has increasingly integrated SBC into its programming across the development and humanitarian contexts.

In 2017, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided UNICEF with a one-time, multi-year grant to improve the organization's ability to deliver high-quality, effective SBC programming at scale to achieve positive results for children. To elevate the positioning and visibility of SBC in its work, UNICEF included it as one of the nine key change strategies of its Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, and invested additional resources in the area, bringing the total investment in SBC strengthening to approximately $13.5 million between 2017 and 2022.

The evaluation of UNICEF investments towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change was commissioned by the UNICEF Evaluation Office in collaboration with the SBC team in the Programme Group, and carried out between January and September 2023. The evaluation was aimed at understanding the impact of the investments on the SBC institutional capacity of UNICEF and its ability to deliver better-quality SBC programming.

The evaluation found that the investments in SBC had been fundamental for the development of SBC institutional capacity in UNICEF, helping to create more consistency in regional staffing in five out of the seven regions in which UNICEF operates, bolstering external support and enabling the development of key global resources that facilitated a broader understanding of SBC across the organization.

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[*] E/ICEF/2024/10.
[**] The evaluation report summary is being circulated in all official languages. The full report is available in English from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website (see annex I).

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

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However, the evaluation also found that, for the investments to fulfil the potential of SBC as a change strategy, UNICEF must increase the influence of SBC leaders and ensure that all decision makers, including sector leaders and partners, have the necessary skills, understanding and commitment to support and advocate for evidence-based, community-led SBC programming.

On the basis of the evaluation's findings and conclusions, eight recommendations were developed for actions that UNICEF should take to strengthen SBC within the organization itself, as well as among its partners, and to leverage the potential of SBC to bring about transformative change.

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

I. Introduction

A. Background to the subject of the evaluation

1.   In today's world, in which development, humanitarian and peacebuilding challenges are increasingly interconnected and complex, crossing borders, contexts and sectors, the strategies to address them must be equally wide-ranging and cross-disciplinary. Social and behaviour change (SBC), an approach that draws on many disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics and communications, is focused on the barriers – cognitive, social and structural – that prevent people from adopting positive practices and keep societies from becoming more equitable, cohesive and peaceful. Based on the understanding that transformative change can be achieved only by empowering people to effect change themselves, the SBC approach is centred on evidence-based collaboration with communities and policymakers.

2.   In recent years, UNICEF has embraced the SBC approach as an essential component of its work, moving away from its previous focus on communication for development (C4D). Both approaches are guided by the socio-ecological model, which is based on five nested, hierarchical levels, starting from the individual (intrapersonal) and expanding outward through the interpersonal, institutional and community levels to policy and the enabling environment. An essential difference is that C4D relies primarily on messaging, while SBC has the advantage of drawing on the insights and methods of multiple disciplines to support positive individual and social change.

3.   In 2017, UNICEF secured a one-time, multi-year investment of about $5 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to strengthen SBC insitutional capacity and programming across the organization. UNICEF further contributed close to $2.5 million, for a total initial investment of about $7.5 million. In 2021, UNICEF took the significant additional step of committing approximately $6 million to a strategy to facilitate the transition from C4D to SBC, bringing the total combined investment in SBC between 2017 and 2022 to approximately $13.5 million.

4.   The transition strategy was underpinned by 10 building blocks: (a) advocating for the significance of SBC; (b) establishing governance structures; (c) strengthening results and evidence; (d) supporting operationalization; (e) enhancing workforce capacity; (f) forming external partnerships; (g) developing supporting tools; (h) engaging in rebranding efforts; (i) providing for SBC early adopters; and (j) providing for expansion. The transition also involved the development of new SBC-specific quality benchmarks, i.e. the performance levels expected against commitments.

B. Purpose, objectives, scope and intended users

5.   The purpose of the evaluation was to understand how and to what extent the investments in SBC of the Gates Foundation and UNICEF since 2017 have improved the SBC institutional capacity of UNICEF and enabled it to deliver better-quality SBC programming. It was also intended to provide recommendations aimed at furthering the institutionalization and strengthening of SBC within UNICEF and among its partners.

6.   The evaluation assessed impact through the examination of four result areas: (a) strengthened SBC institutional capacity and integration; (b) improved SBC programming quality; (c) the development and use of global public goods; and (d) the readiness of UNICEF to use SBC as a core change stretegy to achieve positive results for children.

7. Four related areas of inquiry guided the evaluation:

(a) How have C4D/SBC institutional capacity and integration evolved? What contributed to this change? How can capacity and integration be further strengthened?

(b) How has C4D/SBC programming quality evolved? What contributed to this change? How can quality be further strengthened?

(c) How has the investment contributed to the development and use by UNICEF of C4D/SBC global public goods? How could the development and use of these public goods be further strengthened?

(d) What is the readiness of UNICEF in terms of SBC to support the implementation of its Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, and for SBC to act as a change strategy to achieve the organization's vision?

8. The evaluation's scope encompassed SBC capacity and programming at the global, regional and country levels. The evaluation considered the effect of the various investments together, not the effect of each separate investment. It did not attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of the impact of SBC programming on key results across all countries and sectors. However, eight detailed case studies, covering all of the regions in which UNICEF operates, were conducted to illustrate the ways in which SBC programming quality is shaped by institutional capacity-strengthening in different settings.[1]

9. The primary intended users of the evaluation are SBC practitioners within UNICEF and management and senior leadership, including those outside of the SBC sector, at the global, regional and country levels. To ensure the effectiveness of SBC as a core change strategy, those working within the SBC sector and those working outside of it, including those using SBC approaches to achieve sectoral results, should give equal consideration to the findings and recommendations. The envisioned secondary users are those working in the SBC sector in organizations outside of UNICEF, as well as UNICEF partners and service providers, Member States and potential SBC funders for UNICEF, including the Gates Foundation.

10. It is expected that the findings and conclusions of the evaluation will contribute to shaping the ways in which SBC approaches are implemented, integrated and measured within UNICEF and by its implementing partners and local counterparts.

II. Methodology

A. Overall approach

11. The design and conduct of the evaluation were firmly grounded in UNICEF and United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) norms and standards for evaluation, as well as ethical principles. The evaluation also ensured a gender-sensitive approach by using a gender lens in assessing SBC work; integrating equity considerations by disaggregating data by gender, role and region; and upholding human and child rights, including by emphasizing informed consent, cultural sensitivity and the "do no harm" principle.

12. A theory of change (see annex II) was used to guide the inquiry and explore the causal linkages between the investments, contexts and results by analysing the mechanics of change. It was built around the core narrative of investing in SBC

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[1] The country offices examined were Armenia, Egypt, Guatemala, India, Iraq, the Niger, the Pacific Islands and Somalia. The case studies are available at www.unicef.org/evaluation/reports#/detail/19441.

capacity and programming as an overall cross-cutting strategy, rather than looking at specific sectors or programmes. The theory of change served three main purposes: (a) to guide the evaluation design by highlighting key result areas and informing data collection tools; (b) to aid analysis and interpretation by clarifying correlations and contextual nuances; and (c) to engage evaluation stakeholders by providing a visual summary of the scope of the evaluation.

13.   The evaluation drew from a variety of data sources, including reviewing 25 key documents outlining UNICEF strategies, programmes, tools and resources for SBC; analysing monitoring data from the Gates Foundation, as well as UNICEF internal reports, financial records and staff information; conducting detailed interviews with about 80 individuals engaged in SBC programming or related areas, including UNICEF SBC and non-SBC staff managers at the global, regional and country levels, as well as external partners such as holders of long-term agreements for services, funders and field experts; and administering surveys to over 600 participants, encompassing both UNICEF staff and partners. In-depth case studies were carried out for eight country offices: Armenia, Egypt, Guatemala, India, Iraq, the Niger, the Pacific Islands and Somalia. The evaluation methdology and approach is presented in figure I.

Figure I
Evaluation methodology and approach
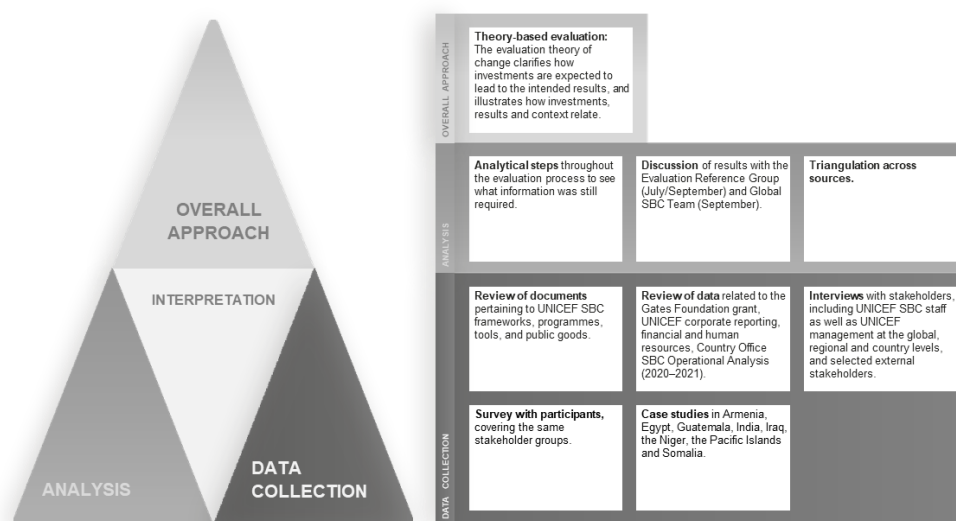
Source: Evaluation team.

B.   Analytical framework and data-gathering tools

14.   The evaluation combined quantitative (data review and a global survey) and qualitative (document review and in-depth interviews) methods and tools. The additional input of the case studies enabled a detailed examination of changes in capacity, programming quality and the application of global public goods at the country level. The country offices were selected on the basis of a broad range of variables, such as different levels of SBC capacity strengthening over the period of the evaluation, humanitarian or development context and country income level, and to include countries from all seven regions in which UNICEF operates.

15.   Analytical steps were taken throughout the evaluation process to see where sufficient information had been collected and what information was still required. The data from the multiple sources were triangulated to describe perceived and actual

changes in each result area and to ensure the consistency, reliability and validity of the findings and recommendations and a focus on their usefulness.

16.   Key stakeholders and experts were actively involved throughout the process. The final analysis and interpretation took into account the feedback received in two meetings with the Evaluation Reference Group and the UNICEF SBC Global Technical Team. The meetings served to validate the findings and conclusions and enable the co-creation of the recommendations, ensuring their grounding in institutional knowledge and priorities.

C.   Limitations and mitigation measures

17.   The main challenges encountered during the evaluation process included the evaluation's broad scope, which limited the depth of the responses; the limited knowledge of some respondents about the SBC investments; potential recall bias due to the six-year period covered by the evaluation; and the risk of bias in the selection of key informants, which was largely based on stakeholder suggestions. In addition, the transition from C4D to SBC quality benchmarks in 2021 hindered direct comparisons over time.

18.   To address these issues, a multifaceted approach was employed, including the use of the evaluation theory of change to guide data collection methods in accordance with the most relevant aspects of the inquiry; the provision of essential information and background to participants during interviews and surveys; data triangulation using multiple data sources to corroborate or qualify findings; and an ongoing review of the list of key informants to ensure wide representation. To address the comparison challenges associated with the transition from C4D to SBC, changes were attributed to the period before or after 2021, rather than analysing the data trend from 2017 to 2022.

III.   Findings

19.   The overall findings on the four result areas defined by the evaluation were consistent across the various data sources, including surveys, interviews and document and data reviews, with significant concurrence that UNICEF as a whole had improved with respect to all four result areas (see figure II).

Figure II
Overall changes in evaluation-defined result areas, 2017–2022
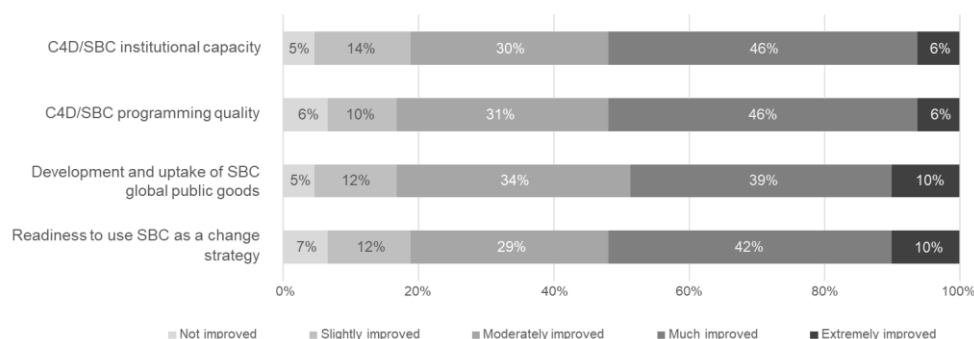
Source: Evaluation survey.

20.   The strongest improvements appeared to be concentrated in the health and child protection sectors and in the humanitarian context as against the systems-strengthening or development context. However, the systemic challenges in SBC capacity and prioritization at the country level resulted in inconsistencies in SBC

implementation across sectors and regions. Those inconsistencies were often due to variations in the level of leadership commitment to SBC and in governance and accountability. One finding was that, in spite of some progress, SBC staff and partners often lacked influence in decision-making within UNICEF, hampering their ability to advocate for higher-quality SBC programming.

21.   Among the different types of respondents, SBC staff held the most favourable views with respect to improvements across the result areas, followed by external staff and non-SBC staff within UNICEF. Regarding improvement in readiness, specifically, external partners had a more positive perspective. Respondents working primarily in the humanitarian sector expressed more positive impressions of the improvements in institutional capacity, programming quality and the development and use of global public goods than those in development contexts, but a large majority of respondents, regardless of their operational environment, shared positive views on the organization's readiness to use SBC as a core change strategy. There were small gender differences for all four result areas, with women tending to be slightly more critical of the results achieved. It is important to highlight that the ratings for improvement were nearly identical across all four result areas, indicating either their close alignment or the difficulty encountered by respondents in differentiating among them.

A.   Strengthened social and behaviour change institutional capacity and integration across UNICEF

22.   **Institutional SBC capacity notably improved between 2017 and 2022**, with stakeholder surveys, interviews and UNICEF data indicating increased adherence to the C4D/SBC quality benchmarks. The investments of both the Gates Foundation and UNICEF were found to have been instrumental, particularly due to such capacity-building efforts as SBC educational programmes. In addition, enhanced regional support, including funding for regional technical advisers in five out of seven regions and the creation of global public resources, furthered understanding and capacity. Collaborative partnerships and standardized indicators, including the C4D/SBC quality benchmarks, were pivotal for enabling the monitoring of SBC and its integration into programmes.

23.   **Uneven institutional capacity.** Despite such progress, disparities in human resources and technical capacity across sectors, regions and contexts persisted, indicating the need for more equitable funding, clear guidance and efforts to insitutionalize SBC uniformly across programmes. In particular, the evaluation found significant regional variations in institutional capacity. The East Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, South Asia, and West and Central Africa regions had the highest percentage of country offices rating in the "advanced" or "established" category, while the Latin America and Caribbean and Europe and Central Asia regions had the lowest percentage with those ratings, with the Middle East and North Africa region falling in between.

24.   **Dependence on leadership.** In addition to the unequal distribution of SBC capacity across countries and sectors and the uneven implementation of the approach, SBC staff reported that it was not clear whether the value proposition of SBC had been realized outside of their network, noting the degree to which the prioritization of SBC human and financial resources was dependent upon individual leadership.

25.   Three types of investment into institutional capacity were made under the Gates Foundation grant:

(a)   **Adding new human resource and external technical capacity.** The regional technical adviser positions were aimed at ensuring technical expertise at the

regional level and the provision of technical support to country offices. In addition, several technical support mechanisms designed to speed up the recuitment process for specialists were developed, including an SBC consultant roster, a surge capacity roster of specialized anthropologists and social researchers for emergency deployment and a long-term agreement procurement mechanism. A technical group of experts was also established to implement high-level technical assistance missions to country or regional offices to enhance their SBC capacity; four such missions were carried out during the period evaluated.

(b) **Strengthening existing capacity.** Initiatives included a course on behavioural communication strategies for global epidemics, offered jointly by UNICEF and the New York University School of Global Public Health, and the SBC learning channel on Agora, a platform developed by UNICEF to provide free learning resources to its staff. Technical programme standards were developed to contribute to a common understanding of SBC approaches, including the SBC Programme Guidance, which includes interconnected resources supporting the programmatic shift from C4D to SBC, and the Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement, aimed at harmonizing approaches and raising the quality of community engagement in development and humanitarian contexts.

(c) **Improving the measurement of and reporting on SBC capacity and quality.** The development of the standardized quality benchmarks (for C4D in 2018 and for SBC in 2021) laid out standards for SBC programming at the country level and provided a common global framework for country office accountability.

26. **Enabling factors.** The inclusion of SBC as a change strategy in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 was critical to elevating its importance within UNICEF and greatly contributed to the improvement in institutional capacity. In addition, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic triggered a greater recognition of the importance of SBC; new experts at the global and regional levels were able to introduce and support such monitoring tools as social listening, which allowed for a more sophisticated understanding of the contextual factors influencing vaccine hesitancy beyond simple vaccine resistance. The involvement of more experts and increased collaboration between sectors due to the pandemic also led to the recognition of the value of SBC in sectors beyond health, including child protection and education. Furthermore, the provision in recent years of SBC policy guidance, technical support and resource mobilization was noted by staff at both the regional and country levels. Staff also perceived, with the shift from C4D to SBC in 2022, a clear move away from a singular focus on communications to a broader application of the social and behavioural sciences, community engagement and participatory design.

27. **Increased funding.** From 2017 to 2022, resources for SBC increased notably – from around $400 million to around $600 million, a positive trend that can be attributed to management support, better SBC positioning and an influx of funding for emergencies, especially for the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as capacity-building efforts, including the new educational resources. However, the proportion of resources allocated to SBC relative to overall expenditures within UNICEF in that same time period remained relatively constant and even started to decline in 2020, standing at just under 8 per cent of overall UNICEF expenses in 2022. Resources for SBC are still considered to be insufficient, with barriers that include inconsistent funding across sectors, short-term or negotiation-dependent funding and the varying positioning of SBC, with funding allocations primarily favouring health-related areas. Long-term investments, consistent cross-sectoral funding, improved SBC positioning and the greater institutionalization of funding mechanisms are needed.

28. **Partnership capacity increased** due to the Gates Foundation investment, including with faith-based and youth-focused organizations, and the use of global

public goods for developing a shared understanding of SBC. The strongest partnerships established were with civil society and community-based organizations. Improvement is needed in the formalization of collaboration with United Nations agencies, research and academic institutions and the private sector, including consistent, context-specific capacity-building for sustained partnerships.

29. **The integration of SBC programming improved** both horizontally (into other sectors) and vertically (governance and accountability), but the establishment of governance and accountability structures remained inconsistent, underscoring the need for continued improvement in ensuring the consistent positioning of SBC and its contribution to decision-making, increased understanding of SBC by leadership at all levels and comprehensive, organization-wide directives for the institutionalization and governance of SBC.
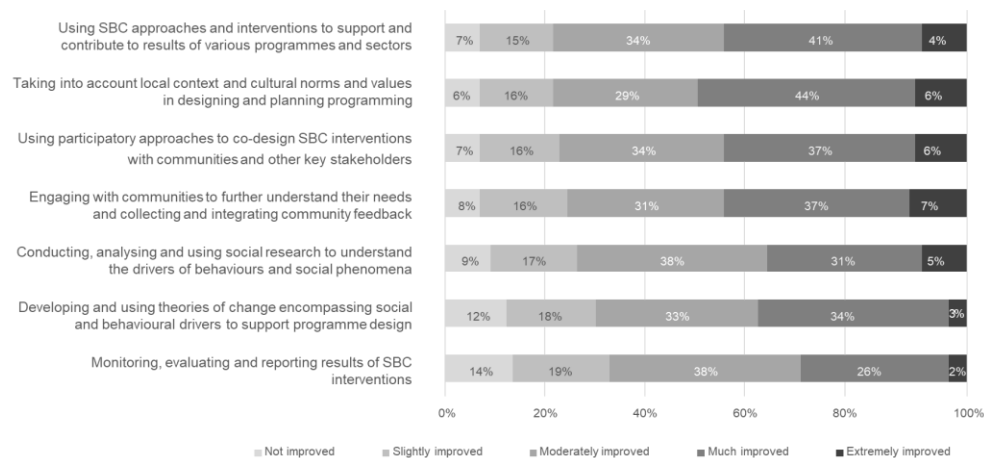
30. **The establishment of standard indicators improved monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning.** The greatest progress in monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning capacity was considered to be the establishment of standard indicators for measuring SBC programme impact. However, compared with other areas of institutional capacity, stakeholders involved in the evaluation were the least positive about the improvements in monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning capacity. Persistent gaps remain with respect to technical capacity and the integration of SBC indicators into national data systems, with the largest barrier reported to be a lack of resources for evidence generation. An increase in funding and dedicated efforts to incorporate SBC data into national systems are needed for progress in monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning.

B. Improved social and behaviour change programming quality

31. **Programming quality improved between 2017 and 2022**, in line with the improvements in institutional capacity and integration (see figure III). The elements that appear to have contributed the most to that improvement include: (a) the Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform, which provides access to social science research and data during humanitarian response and in public health emergencies and was critical in the move towards more evidence-based programming in emergencies; (b) the partnership with the UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, which improved the visibility of social and behavioural research within UNICEF; (c) the development and expansion of rapid data collection platforms and tools, such as U-Report and Community Rapid Assessment, which facilitate rapid data collection at the country level; and (d) the Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement, which helped to standardize the use of participatory approaches in SBC programming.

32. Strengthened programming quality was also attributable to improved technical support to country offices, the increased visibility of SBC in global programme documents and an increased emphasis on high-quality SBC programming during the pandemic. The shift from C4D to SBC expanded the types of approaches used and brought about an increased focus on applied behavioural sciences. In addition, the development of the C4D and SBC quality benchmarks and their institutionalization in five of the seven regional offices most likely helped to enable greater accountability for programming quality, including regarding community engagement.

Figure III
Perceived changes in social and behaviour change programming quality, 2017–2022

	Not improved	Slightly improved	Moderately improved	Much improved	Extremely improved
Using SBC approaches and interventions to support and contribute to results of various programmes and sectors	7%	15%	34%	41%	4%
Taking into account local context and cultural norms and values in designing and planning programming	6%	16%	29%	44%	6%
Using participatory approaches to co-design SBC interventions with communities and other key stakeholders	7%	16%	34%	37%	6%
Engaging with communities to further understand their needs and collecting and integrating community feedback	8%	16%	31%	37%	7%
Conducting, analysing and using social research to understand the drivers of behaviours and social phenomena	9%	17%	38%	31%	5%
Developing and using theories of change encompassing social and behavioural drivers to support programme design	12%	18%	33%	34%	3%
Monitoring, evaluating and reporting results of SBC interventions	14%	19%	38%	26%	2%

Source: Evaluation survey.

33. **Key investments in programming quality** included the funding of partnerships to improve responsiveness and participation, including the Faith and Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities initiative, which supports engagement with faith-based communities and actors to influence positive social and behaviour change, and the Children and Young People's Participatory Research and Communication for Change initiative, aimed at developing a model for systematizing the wide-scale engagement of young people aged 13 to 24 years, particulary the most marginalized, on the key issues that affect their lives. Also funded were new platforms, tools and mechanisms to improve participatory and evidence-based programming and the expansion of existing ones. In addition to U-Report, these included digital engagement and social listening platforms and mechanisms, such as the Internet of Good Things, and other community feedback methods.

34. **Significant progress was seen in responsiveness to community needs and the use of participatory programming**, with some respondents at the country level reporting an increased use of human-centred approaches in their work, in spite of the challenges of implementating SBC programming. However, stakeholders were more negative about improvements in the use of evidence-based programming. It was also found that the cross-cutting nature of SBC made it difficult to align it with sector-specific funding priorities. In addition, since the majority of SBC funding came from the health sector, SBC priorities remained focused there, specifically on immunization, including for evidence generation. Another hindrance was found to be the power dynamics between SBC staff and those in other sectors with regard to the acceptance of guidance and advice from SBC staff.

35. **SBC programming in emergencies.** While support for SBC was found to be more robust during emergencies, some respondents questioned the quality of SBC programming in such contexts due to the time required to develop robust, evidence-based programming and the deprioritization of evidence generation during emergencies. They also noted that SBC programming in emergencies often consisted of short-term campaigns with no consideration of their sustainability.

36. **The improved use of data to generate evidence and guide programming** was noted, including through collaboration with the UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight and the use of the global public goods, in particular the Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform, and of the rapid data collection platforms and tools. However, the evaluation found that technical capacity to use the

data collected to inform programming was still limited. In addition, only minimal feedback mechanisms were in place for sharing with communities how data collected from them were being used to inform programming and to learn how communities perceived the effectiveness of that programming. Another challenge was the amount of resources necessary for data collection, making it more common in middle-income countries, and for the tracking of outcome-level versus output-level data.

37. **Country programme documents.** An analysis of country programme documents (CPDs) produced between 2017 and 2022 showed a limited number of mentions of SBC implementation strategies. In 2023, however, national SBC strategies, partner capacity-building and norm-shifting approaches were some of the more commonly mentioned strategies, appearing in 30–50 per cent of CPDs. Mentions of parenting programmes have also been rising since 2019, reaching 20 per cent of CPDs in 2023. However, other SBC implementation strategies, for example, community dialogues, social listening, psychosocial support, storytelling, social mobilization, digital engagement and private sector engagement, were rarely mentioned.

C. Increased development and use of global public goods

38. **The development and uptake of SBC-related global public resources improved**, according to stakeholders. These included the Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement, the SBC Programme Guidance, the Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform, the SBC Global Think Tank, the Global Alliance for Social and Behaviour Change and the International Social and Behaviour Change Communication Summit. Funding was identified as the main barrier, while another barrier was a lack of understanding of SBC among those in country-level leadership positions and their lack of support for SBC capacity. Another barrier was the complexity of some global public goods, which resulted from the difficulty of balancing the need for sophisticated, technically sound SBC resources with the simplicity and usability required in the field. The overwhelming number of available resources and a lack of guidance on which ones to use and how to use them were also highlighted as hindrances to uptake.

39. **Positive contribution of specific global public goods.** Some of the global public goods developed under the Gates Foundation investment contributed to a shared understanding of both SBC and community engagement and to greater internal capacity. The most useful and therefore the most frequently used global public goods were technical standards and informational platforms that provide insight into the effective application of SBC and community engagement approaches. The SBC Programme Guidance has been used at least once by 97 per cent of SBC staff, with nearly 40 per cent having used it more than five times; more than half of respondents considered it to be very useful. Importantly, the SBC Programme Guidance appears to be used most frequently outside of UNICEF headquarters, in particular by SBC staff in field, country and regional offices. The Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement were reported to be used be only slightly less often. Also frequently used were the SBC resources for humanitarian programming, such as the Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform. It was clear that, at a minimum, those in country offices perceived that some of the investments in global public goods were making a difference. In addition, they had provided clarity during the shift from C4D to SBC and had been useful in specific contexts, such as at the start of a new country programme or during humanitarian emergencies.

40. Survey feedback provided insight into an important nuance, however: while the general perception was that the global public goods had contributed to the visibility of UNICEF in the field of SBC, some staff believed that the increased visibility had

not necessarily translated into enhanced internal capacity, and some country-level SBC staff reported that not all of the global public goods had been promoted at the country level, in particular the SBC Global Think Tank and the Global Alliance for Social and Behaviour Change.

D. Strengthened readiness of UNICEF to use social and behaviour change as a core change strategy to achieve positive results for children

41.   **The readiness of UNICEF to employ SBC as a core change strategy to achieve positive outcomes for children improved.** Readiness was assessed across five parameters: (a) operational readiness; (b) technical readiness; (c) positioning and leadership; (d) governance and accountability; and (e) partnerships. Each parameter was rated on a four-point scale (insufficient, nascent, sufficient or strong), with composite scores averaging subscores from different data sources. Overall, readiness levels ranged from nascent to sufficient, meaning that, while none were insufficient, none were strong either, aligning with the improvements reported in institutional capacity and integration, programming quality and the development and use of global public goods. On the other hand, most survey respondents perceived that SBC was already playing a vital role in the work of UNICEF (see figure IV).

Figure IV
Perceptions of UNICEF social and behaviour change readiness among UNICEF staff
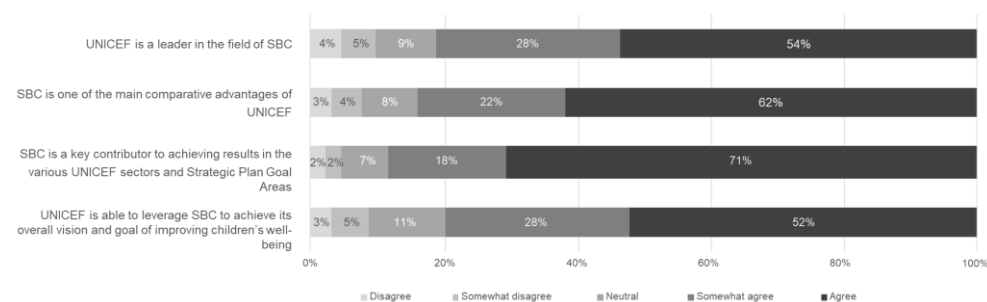
Source: Evaluation survey.

42.   **Operational readiness.** The evaluation found an unequal distribution of the sustained resourcing across sectors needed to ensure that UNICEF is equipped to meet the full potential of SBC programming.

43.   **Technical readiness.** Country offices generally reported having some standardized and context-appropriate capacity-building training packages and tools, but a majority of internal and external staff felt that technical capacity was still deficient in some areas.

44.   **Positioning and leadership.** The positioning of SBC and leadership buy-in, both critical to ensuring effective, high-quality SBC programming and its integration as a core change strategy, were found to have improved significantly since 2017. However, the prioritization of SBC varied across regions, countries and programmes and, again, depended heavily upon individual leadership interest.

45.   **Governance and accountability.** While good practices were reported in many countries, they varied across different levels of UNICEF, with gaps in structure, funding, staffing and cross-sectoral coordination. The gaps were attributed by respondents to inconsistent funding and a lack of clear guidance on cross-sectoral functions and coordination.

46. **Partnerships.** Despite the growth in institutionalized partnerships since 2017, capacity-building among partners and enhanced collaboration were still lacking. The absence of ties with local universities and research institutions and weak private sector relationships stood out. In addition, inadequate efforts had been made to contextualize, translate and distribute the existing capacity-building tools and global public goods outside of UNICEF and the SBC network.

IV. Conclusions and the way forward

47. **The joint investments of the Gates Foundation and UNICEF provided the critical building blocks for the institutional strengthening of SBC in UNICEF.** Each of the intermediate result areas examined – institutional capacity and integration, programming quality and the development and use of global public goods – was found to have contributed to the readiness of UNICEF to use SBC as a core change strategy to achieve positive results for children. Furthermore, each of the interconnected elements of readiness was found to have improved between 2017 and 2022, with the investments of the Gates Foundation and UNICEF having made a significant contribution to that progress, as did the concerted efforts of SBC global leadership. In particular, the investments contributed to the establishment of more consistent human resourcing for SBC at the regional level and the development of key global public goods that fostered a greater shared understanding of SBC, especially as the organization shifted from C4D to SBC and began to use novel approaches grounded in the social and behavioural sciences.

48. **The investments were made in the context of significant systemic limitations in delivering SBC programming at the country level.** In particular, the evaluation found notable inconsistencies in the operationalization of global public goods, capacity-building efforts and SBC programming improvements across sectors, regions and countries. Those discrepancies were due in large part to variations in positioning and leadership and in governance and accountability. Notably, the dependence on the quality of individual leadership, which appears to be largely based on personal interest in SBC, limits the ability of global efforts to reliably harness SBC for improved programming at the country level. While efforts to strengthen institutional capacity have contributed to improved capacity among SBC staff and SBC-focused partners, such individuals appear to lack standing in UNICEF decision-making processes, so that they are unable to advocate effectively for improved SBC programming quality across sectors.

49. **In order for the investments in SBC institutional capacity to be truly transformative, it is necessary to increase the influence of SBC leaders.** In addition, capacity-building efforts are needed across the organization to ensure that leadership and decision makers outside of the SBC network, including sectoral leadership as well as partners, are equipped with the skills, understanding and interest to advocate for and implement evidence-based, community-owned SBC programming.

50. **More equitable positioning and funding of SBC across all sectors and programmes and consistent support and buy-in from leadership could strengthen programming quality.** The evaluation found an unequal distribution across sectors of the sustained resourcing necessary for UNICEF to meet the full potential of SBC programming. Investments in SBC must be focused on participatory, community-led, sustainable and evidence-based programming rather than on short-term, project-specific communications efforts. More investment is needed to ensure sufficient technical capacity, particularly regarding novel SBC approaches and the collection and use of social and behavioural data. Investing in institutionalizing the collection of social and behavioural data within national systems

and building the capacity of internal and external stakeholders to use such data effectively will expedite the adoption of evidence-based programming. To build greater coherence and consistency in both capacity and programming quality, more effective governance and accountability mechanisms should also be institutionalized.

51.   **The global public goods should be leveraged to increase awareness and understanding of SBC at the country level.** To increase their relevance and foster their uptake within UNICEF and to support partner engagement and sustainable development, the global public goods should be adapted for various contexts and widely disseminated.

V.   Recommendations

52.   The eight recommendations set out below in priority order were built on the findings and conclusions of the evaluation and co-created and validated by internal and external stakeholders and experts. The recommendations were designed to primarily address institutional weaknesses and those embedded within the international financing for development system. For the SBC function to be adequately resourced and positioned to fulfil its potential for programmatic impact, the monitoring of the recommendations' implementation, as well as accountability, must be at the highest levels of the organization.

53.   **Seek out, advocate for and prioritize donor funding that addresses the systemic, social and behavioural drivers of results for children across the development and humanitarian programming continuum.** (High priority; significant time and financial investment)

Influenced by a limited understanding of SBC, donor funding prioritizes short-term, project-based funding for communications and education initiatives focused on a single output, rather than on outcomes and systemic drivers of change. Humanitarian or emergency SBC funding is rarely maintained once the situation subsides, resulting in ineffective humanitarian programming and limited sectoral institutionalization of SBC and impeding impact measurement. Priorities include raising the awareness of donors and fundraisers about the new SBC programme model, the underlying social and behavioural science evidence, and the time and effort needed for impact. UNICEF should advocate with key institutional donors for a renewed SBC funding strategy across the humanitarian programming cycle, prioritizing systems strengthening and emergency preparedness. UNICEF should institutionalize SBC resources, with a clear theory of change covering contributions and results, and define SBC funding benchmarks for corporate fundraising across thematic priority areas, global humanitarian thematic funding and Humanitarian Action for Children appeals. Proposal-writing teams should include an SBC focal point. SBC funds could be soft-earmarked within the thematic pooled funds deployed directly to country offices.

54.   **Establish standards and guidance to systematically distribute SBC funding across all programme areas and contexts so that funding is reflective of the required contribution of SBC to core results.** (High priority; significant time and financial investment)

While the inclusion of SBC as a core change strategy has elevated its positioning and increased its funding, individual leadership determines its positioning and funding within each office and programme area. A minimum level of SBC programmatic integration should be standardized and SBC outputs should be included from the outset of country programming to ensure funding. SBC should be included within country-level evidence syntheses and situation analyses, with better identification of social and behavioural drivers and challenges for each programme area to ensure targeted fundraising. Funding benchmarks for SBC programming, monitoring and

evaluation should be incorporated into budget protocols, including for country programmes.

55. **Ensure that SBC staff are represented in organization-wide decision-making processes and structures at the global, regional and country levels. Also ensure that all leaders tasked with representing SBC in such forums have the requisite expertise and understanding to advocate effectively for SBC and to make informed decisions.** (High priority; significant time investment; moderate financial investment)

Among the core change strategies, SBC counts one of the lowest proportions of senior-level staff and no director-level position. SBC leadership is often underrepresented, if at all, in key decision-making forums at the global, regional and country levels, with SBC representatives demonstrating varying levels of expertise, which could lead to inconsistencies in SBC understanding, positioning and resourcing. UNICEF should establish senior SBC posts, including at least one dedicated director-level position at the global level, and include at least one individual with SBC competencies in the Global Management Team and the regional and country management teams. Corporate-level SBC commitments, with monitoring and reporting requirements, should be established. SBC skill requirements should be elevated across the organization and capacity-building tools and high-level training developed to facilitate SBC institionalization and the achievement of priority sectoral results.

56. **Provide context-specific, actionable guidance to ensure greater consistency in SBC governance, coordination and resourcing mechanisms.** (High priority; moderate time investment; limited financial investment)

Decision-making processes regarding SBC capacity and governance should be separated from dependence on leadership at the regional and country levels. The SBC Operational Guidance[2] should be reviewed, validated and mainstreamed at all institutional levels, with tailored versions provided to regional and country offices detailing SBC programming management, funding and integration, including context-specific guidance based on such key factors as humanitarian status, level of SBC needs and programme size.

57. **Increase the prioritization of and funding for SBC evidence generation and use.** (High priority; significant time and financial investment)

Funding for evidence generation on SBC interventions remains insufficient. Without demonstrating what works in different contexts, it is impossible to advocate effectively for increased SBC programming to achieve sectoral and cross-sectoral results. The most efficient and sustainable way of generating SBC data at the regional and country levels is likely to invest in the mainstreaming of social and behavioural data collection and results measurement systems within Governments and among national and subnational partners, potentially by building the capacity of local actors or fostering partnerships between local universities or research institutions and Governments. UNICEF should continue to invest in building SBC monitoring and evaluation capacity, including for SBC impact evaluation, behavioural insights and formative research, especially for humanitarian contexts, including by disseminating examples of systems strengthening and capacity-building. Existing platforms could be used for evidence dissemination. UNICEF should include a section on SBC evidence generation in all fundraising proposals and, building on the precedent of 1

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[2] As the SBC Operational Guidance was launched in 2022, it was considered unlikely to have contributed directly to any changes seen during the evaluation period and was therefore excluded from consideration.

per cent of all programmatic budgets allocated to evaluation, allocate at least 3 per cent of all SBC budgets to evidence generation.

58. **Invest in strengthening SBC systems and capacity among key implementing partners, especially Governments.** (High priority; significant time and financial investment)

Strong partnerships are crucial for delivering and monitoring SBC programming impact, especially among government partners, which are the key owners of UNICEF results. Currently, insufficient resources are dedicated to building SBC systems, structures and capacities among such partners. UNICEF should invest in the development and capacities of government structures responsible for SBC. Working across country teams, it should develop an approach for strategic engagement with line ministries on institutionalizing clear SBC outcomes. SBC funding requests should include SBC system development within Governments and local structures, with a focus on sustainability. UNICEF should consider the development of sustainable capacity-building methods, such as partnerships with local academic institutions and secondments within SBC teams for external partners and government officials, good-practice guidelines on capacity-building, and a database of academic partnerships and other systems-strengthening initiatives to foster country-level learning and regional linkages.

59. **Localize existing global public goods and increase intentional operationalization efforts to ensure greater uptake among country-level stakeholders.** (Medium priority; significant time and financial investment)

UNICEF should localize the global public goods perceived as most useful, contextualizing them according to region, country and sector, translating them according to linguistic needs, and disseminating and institutionalizing them at the country and field levels. Given the reportedly overwhelming number of tools, UNICEF should mainstream the most effective ones into national and subnational systems before developing new ones. An inclusive design process should be used for any new tools to build in user needs, local relevance and dissemination plans.

60. **Increase private sector engagement to drive further innovation.** (Medium priority; significant time investment; medium to significant financial investment, depending on partnership model)

At the country level, private sector partnerships are less established than other types of collaboration, representing a significant missed opportunity. The private sector can bring innovation, nimbleness and operational efficiency to complex challenges and provide ideas, platforms, networks and resources. During the period covered by the evaluation, engagement with the private sector was not prioritized in the face of the need for C4D and SBC institutional strengthening. However, the inclusion of SBC and business engagement for child rights as change strategies in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 triggered a collaborative effort to expand private sector partnerships. To tap into that potential, UNICEF must take a more structured approach, crafting strategies for regional and country contexts. The SBC sector and fundraising teams should collaborate at the global and regional levels to develop high-potential private sector partnerships linked to results frameworks. The SBC Operational Guidance should include guidance for country offices, building on the SBC Programme Guidance. Guidance on engaging with the private sector at the global and regional levels should be developed, with best practices, an ethics framework and recommendations on communicating the value added of SBC. Information on private sector partnerships should be promoted at the global level and SBC global and regional teams should develop an advocacy and engagement orientation for private sector engagement.

VI.   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).

Annex I

Evaluation of UNICEF investments towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change

1.   Due to space limitations, the evaluation of UNICEF investments towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change is not contained within the present annex.

2.   The report is available on the UNICEF Evaluation Office website: https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/evaluation-unicef-investments-towards-institutional-strengthening-social-and-behaviour-change.

Annex II

Theory of change for the evaluation of UNICEF investments towards institutional strengthening for social and behaviour change

Contextual factors

- Sector
- Humanitarian vs. development context
- Effective leadership
- Interest in social and behaviour change
- Language and culture

✔ Results

Use of social and behaviour change as a core change strategy to achieve positive results for children

Readiness

| Operational readiness | Technical readiness | Positioning and leadership | Governance and accountability | Institutionalized partnerships |

Programming quality

| Responsive and timely programming | Evidence-based programming | Participatory Programming |

Global public goods

| Development and use of innovative global goods | Community engagement among global and country-level partners |

Capacity

| Human resource capacity | Financial resource capacity | Monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning capacity | Partnership capacity |

External inputs

| Evidence-based donor funding | Investments in capacity-building |

Internal inputs

| Support for social and behaviour change from leadership | Investments in capacity-building |

Internal capacity

| Internal governance, coordination and accountability mechanisms |

Source: Evaluation team.