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Update on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Executive Board decision 2023/10, which, in paragraph 2, “[r]equests UNICEF to provide an update to the Executive Board at the annual session of 2024, for decision, on how the organization is preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse”.

The report provides a progress update on the work of UNICEF in advancing its efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. The report frames the updates on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse as part of advancing safeguarding and as part of the strengthened risk management enterprise approach for UNICEF.

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

* E/ICEF/2024/10.



I. Overview

1. UNICEF is committed to safeguarding. This means that UNICEF works in ways that prevent and reduce the risk of harm to all persons as a result of their contact with UNICEF or the work of the organization. The new UNICEF Policy on Safeguarding of 4 March 2024 defines safeguarding as inclusive of, but not limited to, ensuring protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. The Policy stresses the fact that everyone at UNICEF, regardless of role, has safeguarding responsibilities. It further reiterates that all UNICEF staff and complementary personnel, in both their personal and professional lives, are prohibited from attempting, soliciting, encouraging, assisting or engaging in acts that may cause harm to individuals. This includes, but it is not limited to, any acts involving sexual exploitation and abuse; any sexual relationship between those providing assistance and protection and a person benefiting from such assistance; and sexual activity with children. It thus reaffirms the UNICEF commitments to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse under the Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2003/13](#) and the six core principles of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

2. The UNICEF strategy to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse has five pillars: accountability and prevention, reporting, victim assistance, investigations and sanctions, and partnerships. UNICEF has aligned its Strategic Plan indicators with the strategy to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse, focusing on strengthening of systems for prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse and scaling up of safe and accessible reporting channels for children and adults. These indicators are fully embedded in country programme monitoring and reporting. In 2023, progress against these indicators reflected strengthening relevant systems at UNICEF and with its partners. The present report contains updates against these indicators and responds to Executive Board decision 2023/10 from the annual session of 2023.

3. In 2023, UNICEF continued to intensify efforts to ensure that reporting mechanisms for sexual exploitation and abuse are safe, accessible and survivor-centred, which contributed to significant improvement in the accessibility of reporting channels. In 2023, country offices reported that an estimated 70.3 million children and adults had access to safe and accessible channels to report sexual exploitation and abuse, compared with 49.2 million in 2022, while the number of reports received through these channels increased from 82 in 2022 to 128 in 2023.

4. As noted in recent updates to the Board ([E/ICEF/2024/8](#)), UNICEF is strengthening its enterprise risk management with a more overarching portfolio view of risks at different levels of the organization, and a more coordinated approach, integrated in programmatic, operational and strategic planning and decision-making. Safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse are part of the way that UNICEF manages risks at different levels. Tracking the percentage of country offices that register identified safeguarding risks shows an increasing trend in the past year, with 84 per cent of offices meeting the organizational benchmarks for addressing safeguarding risks, compared to 68 per cent in 2022.

5. Continued investment in ensuring that all staff and complementary personnel are aware of the prohibited actions and expected practices continues through dissemination of information, training and awareness-raising and by making prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and other safeguarding harms part of the organizational culture of UNICEF.

6. UNICEF continues to work proactively to ensure improved access to mechanisms for complaints, feedback and redressal for everyone, especially children, women and other vulnerable groups, in the areas in which it operates. Work is under

way to strengthen, integrate and expand existing channels to ensure that every person with whom UNICEF interacts has safe, accessible and inclusive channels to report any type of feedback, including reports of sexual exploitation and abuse. Any such feedback received by UNICEF must be professionally handled and addressed in a timely manner. For sexual exploitation and abuse allegations, this includes rapid escalation and reporting of cases for assessment and investigation to the UNICEF Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI) and follow-up to provide appropriate services and support to the survivor. Strong practices are exercised by OIAI in assessing and investigating sexual exploitation and abuse cases. In 2023, OIAI received and registered 512 new cases, including 185 concerning alleged misconduct by UNICEF staff members. Of the new cases, sexual exploitation and abuse was the second-largest category (25 per cent), following fraud involving misuse of programme funds by third parties.

7. From 1 January to 31 December 2023, UNICEF added 60 sexual exploitation and abuse allegations in the United Nations-wide data system for tracking such allegations. The 60 cases concerned a total of 70 victims and 61 perpetrators – 12 involving UNICEF personnel and 48 involving personnel of partners implementing its programmes (compared with 44 in 2022). This broadly mirrors United Nations system-wide data. It can be noted that cases pertaining to implementing partner personnel are not directly subject to UNICEF disciplinary processes. The number of personnel members found to have committed sexual exploitation and abuse in 2023 was one. This case was an allegation investigated by OIAI in 2022. The contract of the individual was terminated.

8. In 2023, UNICEF continued to advance its work with partners that implement programmes to strengthen their capacities to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. In line with the IASC Harmonized Implementation Tool on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacity, all of the approximately 3,000 active civil society organizations (CSOs) partnering with UNICEF have been assessed in relation to their capacity to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. While the majority have adequate systems in place with a full capacity rating, 28 per cent (860) CSOs of active partners are currently working to improve their protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacity, with continuous support from UNICEF. In 2023, the UNICEF Supply Division advanced its work to assess and mitigate safeguarding risks, including sexual exploitation and abuse, with vendors engaged in high-risk activities.

9. UNICEF continues to collaborate with other agencies and organizations in inter-agency forums and working groups related to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. UNICEF is leading inter-agency work within IASC and core workstreams within the United Nations Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Working Group under the leadership of the United Nations Special Coordinator on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. UNICEF is also leading on a number of workstreams in the current IASC Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment Vision and Strategy for 2022–2026. This supports standard-setting and workplanning, sharing promising practices, and coordinating capacity-building efforts with implementing partners. In response to the Executive Board decision from its annual session of 2023, UNICEF played a key role in advancing more harmonized inter-agency reporting on sexual exploitation and abuse, with benchmarks agreed between UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Office for Project Services, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). The agreed benchmarks, reflected in this report, allow for comparison and better tracking of year-on-year progress across agencies.

10. While good progress has been made during the year, challenges also persist, in part due to resource constraints. The protection from sexual exploitation and abuse work with communities at country level is both programmatic and inter-agency in nature, and further resources are needed to fully deliver on UNICEF commitments, including to implement prioritized actions as part of country-level action plans. The UNICEF and IASC mapping exercise¹ found that country-level inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse structures face resource challenges to sustain the collective protection from sexual exploitation and abuse work. In 2022, almost half of the countries (46 per cent) with humanitarian response plans reported having less than 25 per cent of the needs covered, despite protection from sexual exploitation and abuse funding needs being comparatively minimal. There is a need for additional collective resources to effectively prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse at country level and through global change.

11. Highlighted as a priority recommendation in the independent review of IASC protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, UNICEF supports a joined-up approach to resourcing protection from sexual exploitation and abuse work at all levels. In 2023, IASC launched the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Capacity Project (PSEACap) to enhance country actions and capacity, ensuring a more robust and effective approach for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse by deploying dedicated inter-agency coordinators to support humanitarian coordinators and country teams in the 15 highest-risk locations. UNICEF has contributed the inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordinator posts in five IASC priority countries to help accelerate country-level efforts and bolster inter-agency mechanisms. A sustainable system-wide resourcing strategy is also needed to fund inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse work and action plans. Work also needs to continue to advance safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse with clear communication and continued capacity strengthening of both staff and partners; there is scope to improve some human resources-related practices and strengthen links between safeguarding, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and organizational culture.

II. Introduction

12. In its decision 2023/10, the Executive Board requested UNICEF to provide it with an update at the annual session of 2024, for decision, on how the organization is preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse. The Board also requested UNICEF to continue to take action to ensure a victim/survivor-centred, system-wide and coherent approach to preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, while leveraging its mandate, and to continue to foster an inclusive and respectful organizational culture where all personnel are empowered and encouraged to report sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. The Executive Board also asked UNICEF to improve its vetting practices and to consider piloting the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme.

13. The present document is being submitted to the Executive Board in fulfilment of those requests. It contains an update on progress made since the annual session of 2023 in pursuance of the UNICEF strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment; the 2024 Policy on Safeguarding;

¹ The IASC mapping exercise is an initiative started in 2019 and led by UNICEF on behalf of the IASC, to track collective inter-agency progress on accelerating protection from sexual exploitation and abuse among all countries with a humanitarian response plan/regional response plan. The data collected annually are analysed and displayed on the IASC PSEA Dashboard, <https://humanitarianaction.info/>.

indicators of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025; and common benchmarks as agreed at inter-agency level.

14. The present report complements the UNICEF report concerning the organization's efforts to improve organizational culture and diversity, equity and inclusion ([E/ICEF/2024/15](#)).

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

15. The UNICEF 2019 strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment describes the organization's comprehensive approach. The strategy contains five strategic elements:

- (a) An organizational culture of zero tolerance built through accountability, prevention and gender equality;
- (b) Reporting mechanisms that are safe and trusted;
- (c) Investigations and sanctions that are swift and credible;
- (d) A quality response that is survivor-centred;
- (e) Engaging partners in the fight against sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

16. As noted in previous reports to the Executive Board, UNICEF has aligned its Strategic Plan indicators with these elements of its strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and sexual harassment.

17. In most areas, the indicators and benchmarks being presented in this report reflect good progress in strengthening relevant systems within UNICEF and its partners.

18. This report focuses on the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse of individuals external to UNICEF. *Internal* workplace issues, including sexual harassment and organizational culture, are not the focus of this report but are addressed separately in the update on organizational culture and diversity ([E/ICEF/2024/15](#)). However, recognizing the importance of the internal organizational culture to influence and support the work on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, a brief summary of some relevant actions is presented below.

19. UNICEF currently holds the chairpersonship of the newly established United Nations Executive Group to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Harassment in the UN System (2024–2025). Following rounds of consultation between more than 30 United Nations entities, a shared workplan has been developed to: (a) improve policies to prevent and respond to sexual harassment; (b) share experiences and ensure a coherent approach; (c) enhance the skills of United Nations personnel to effectively address misconduct; (d) monitor progress, systematically tracking, analysing and reporting on the effectiveness and impact of initiatives; and (e) communicate and engage with stakeholders, and particularly with victims, to garner their feedback and rebuild trust.

20. A UNICEF workplan has been developed by the Executive Group, with the priorities to: (a) strengthen internal capacities and expertise on sexual harassment; and (b) raise awareness and capacity-building of all staff and personnel, including the development and roll-out of targeted and improved training.

A. Sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment reporting mechanisms are safe, accessible and survivor-centred

21. Benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Safe, accessible and gender- and child-sensitive mechanisms for reporting sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment are in place and are victim/survivor-centred;

(b) Community engagement and awareness-raising on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse is carried out in each community receiving and/or affected by United Nations assistance.

22. In 2023, UNICEF continued its efforts to enhance and establish robust systems for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. Seventy-two out of 129 (56 per cent) country offices have implemented holistic systems, which include protection from sexual exploitation and abuse action plans, reporting mechanisms, quality systems for victim assistance and referrals, and partner training. This represents an increase from 65 country offices in 2022. These efforts contributed to a significant rise in the estimated number of children and adults who had access to safe channels to report sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian, development, protection and/or other personnel. The number of individuals estimated to have had access to such reporting channels in 2023 was 70.3 million, compared with 49.2 million in 2022. The number of reports of sexual exploitation and abuse received through these channels also increased by 53 per cent in 2023. UNICEF sees the increase in the number of these reports as a positive indicator, signalling growing awareness of an under-reported issue. It suggests that UNICEF efforts in both raising awareness and establishing accessible reporting systems are yielding results, as communities increasingly utilize these channels to voice concerns.

23. Seventy-eight per cent of UNICEF staff members responding to the 2023 protection from sexual exploitation and abuse survey state that they either “agree” or “strongly agree” that UNICEF is taking actions to raise awareness among local communities to prevent and report sexual exploitation and abuse cases.

24. An effective reporting system identifies and resolves concerns as soon as they arise. Feedback loops and analysis of trends of reports also help to point to corrective actions needed to prevent further abuses. In 2023, 124 out of 129 country offices (96 per cent) reported having office-wide protection from sexual exploitation and abuse reporting systems, training offered for all UNICEF personnel, and internal management structures for receiving and reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse allegations, along with a focal point system. A total of 104 country offices (81 per cent) also trained all partners, including government partners, and 38 had age- and gender-sensitive protection from sexual exploitation and abuse key messages and communications materials visibly present and distributed in all UNICEF-supported sites. The improvement of reporting systems in country offices and with partners has been a key strategy for scaling up safe and accessible community-based reporting channels.

25. Raising awareness among community members of what sexual exploitation and abuse is and how to report concerns is key. In many countries, such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Haiti, UNICEF uses its electronic messaging and polling platform, U-Report, to disseminate key messages, to ask communities about their knowledge of reporting channels and how to report cases of misconduct, and to ask about their preferred methods for reporting concerns. Results of such surveys have often reflected considerable levels of sexual exploitation and abuse and other forms of misconduct by the broader aid community, and lingering gaps in knowledge about how to report. Community feedback collected through

digital platforms is shared with the Humanitarian Country Teams to address through inter-agency mitigation measures, and is also used to strengthen UNICEF responses and tailor training for staff and partners.

26. Integrating sexual exploitation and abuse with other existing feedback, complaints and redressal mechanisms is a strategy that UNICEF has taken forward with positive results. In Afghanistan, UNICEF integrated protection from sexual exploitation and abuse into emergency cash transfer across the country through awareness-raising activities, and trained Grievance Redress Mechanism complaint intakers, which contributed to an almost threefold increase in access to sexual exploitation and abuse reporting channels in 2023.

B. Investigations are survivor-centred and timely, and result in appropriate accountability measures

27. Benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Investigations are victim/survivor-centred, including by keeping the victims/survivors informed and supported;

(b) Investigations are carried out in a timely manner and appropriate accountability measures are taken.

28. In 2023, OIAI received and registered 512 new cases, including 185 concerning alleged misconduct by UNICEF staff members. Of the new cases, sexual exploitation and abuse was the second-largest category (25 per cent), following fraud involving misuse of programme funds by third parties. Paragraph 29 outlines the relevant elements of the cases pertaining to UNICEF. It should be noted that OIAI occasionally receives reports pertaining to subjects or perpetrators who are either not identifiable or are not linked to UNICEF at all. These cases are not added to the United Nations-wide data system for tracking sexual exploitation and abuse allegations, but are registered in the internal UNICEF case management system.

29. UNICEF publicly reports, almost in real time, allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving its personnel and partners implementing its programmes. From 1 January to 31 December 2023, UNICEF reported 60 sexual exploitation and abuse allegations, involving 70 victims and 61 perpetrators – 12 involving UNICEF personnel and 48 involving personnel of partners implementing its programmes. The number of reports of sexual exploitation and abuse involving UNICEF partners implementing programmes was 48 cases, compared with 44 in 2022. This broadly mirrors United Nations system-wide data.

30. Of the 48 cases involving partners implementing programmes, 20 have been closed. Eleven cases were closed after the alleged perpetrators were found to have committed sexual exploitation and abuse and were dismissed from the partner entity; two were closed due to insufficient information to assess the allegation or lack of jurisdiction over the allegation; one was closed because the alleged perpetrator separated from the hiring entity before the allegation was found to be substantiated; one was closed because the alleged perpetrator was found to have committed sexual exploitation and abuse, but for safety reasons concerning the victim, they were not dismissed from the hiring entity; three were closed because there was a finding that the allegations were unsubstantiated; and two were closed due to lack of collaboration or corroboration from the victim. Additional information on UNICEF allegations reported since 2017 can be found on the website of the United Nations Special

Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse.²

31. Of the 12 cases of allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving UNICEF personnel publicly reported in the tracker, 5 have been closed as at the time of the writing of this report. Of these five cases, three were closed after assessment, and two have been investigated. Out of these two, the investigation of one case concluded that the alleged perpetrators were not connected to UNICEF; in the second, the case was closed due to insufficient evidence. One personnel member was found to have committed sexual exploitation and abuse, and their contract was terminated. This case was originally received in 2022 and the investigation concluded in 2023, hence is in addition to the 12 allegations recorded in 2023.

32. Under key performance indicators introduced in 2023, OIAI aims to finalize 65 per cent of its cases under assessment within 90 days and 65 per cent of its cases under investigation within nine months. In 2023, the Office closed 56 per cent of assessments of sexual exploitation and abuse (including assessments of implementing partner investigations) within 90 days, and 0 per cent of investigations of sexual exploitation and abuse within nine months. All cases of sexual misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse, receive the highest level of prioritization. The often complex and challenging nature of these cases, including the need to ensure that potential victims receive appropriate support and provide informed consent to proceed with any investigative process, as well as difficulties identifying potential victims and subjects in some instances, can prolong timelines in some cases.

33. To operationalize a victim-centred approach in investigations and to address the investigation capacity gaps of implementing partners, UNICEF regional and country offices provided training for investigators and non-investigators on how to conduct non-investigative preliminary assessments and screening to respond to risks or alerts of sexual exploitation and abuse in the field, and dedicated training for investigators on a victim/survivor-centred approach to sexual exploitation and abuse investigations, including in Burundi, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania.

34. In 2023, OIAI supported a number of training initiatives on investigation, including targeted investigations capacity-building for investigators and investigations managers of CSO partners implementing programmes in the Central African Republic. The Investigations Section of OIAI expanded its outreach efforts, delivering over 40 presentations (compared to 31 in 2022) for staff in country and regional offices and for implementing partners. Topics ranged from an overview of the work of OIAI to sexual misconduct and responding to allegations of fraud and corruption.

C. Adequate safeguards and appropriate actions ensure the effective tackling of sexual exploitation and abuse when working with implementing partners

35. The benchmark for measuring progress under this element is:

(a) Implementing partners have adequate protection from sexual exploitation and abuse safeguards in place, and action is taken in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse.

36. UNICEF continues its efforts to strengthen partnerships, including building partner capacity across the sector, to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse.

² United Nations, 'Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse', www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/data-allegations-un-system-wide.

Since July 2021, all active partners are systematically assessed on their protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacities. In 2023, 2,015 (69 per cent) of 3,000 active CSOs that partner with UNICEF were rated as having “full” capacity; 25 per cent, or 729, were rated at “medium” capacity, while only 4 per cent (119 organizations) were rated at “low” capacity with capacity gaps that still need to be urgently addressed. Of 124 UNICEF country offices with CSO partners implementing programmes, 104 offices met the benchmark of having at least 80 per cent of their partners with full or medium capacity. All partners (100 per cent) in 13 country offices have been rated as having full capacity, that is, achieving all expected standards, compared to only 2 country offices in 2022. Partners that do not meet all expected standards are being supported by UNICEF to improve their capacity to prevent and address protection from sexual exploitation and abuse concerns. Providing tailored support for partners’ capacity strengthening, particularly in relation to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse systems for adequate handling of and response to allegations, remains a key priority, and continued investment in the area is required.

37. In 2023, UNICEF used the United Nations-wide Harmonized Assessment Tool in the assessment of partners, with the expectation to fully transition to the Tool by 2025. The United Nations Partner Portal is the digital platform where assessment results are stored, managed and shared. This represents a key step towards harmonization and better coordination between United Nations agencies to manage sexual exploitation and abuse risks with partners and to protect communities. For the first time, the United Nations is able to make joint assessments, share results across agencies, build and monitor capacity plans, and support partners in one digital platform. The protection from sexual exploitation and abuse Implementing Partner Protocol Working Group comprised of the World Food Programme, UNFPA, UNICEF, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organization is leading this work. Since the introduction of the United Nations-wide protection from sexual exploitation and abuse module in 2023, over 25 webinars have been jointly organized in English, French, Spanish and Arabic, reaching over 3,000 personnel from United Nations agencies and partner organizations. The launch of the Harmonized Assessment Tool is accompanied by the creation of a resource library in the United Nations Partner Portal where guidance on the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacity process is shared and a repository of resources to support partners’ capacity-strengthening is available.

38. Reflecting the commitment of UNICEF to continually improving its approaches and supporting capacity-strengthening of UNICEF teams and partners as well as the broader inter-agency system, in 2023, UNICEF updated the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Toolkit, which serves as key programming guidance to support UNICEF partner organizations to develop and strengthen their protection from sexual exploitation and abuse procedures and mechanisms. The Toolkit is a global public good that may also be useful for other actors, including government partners and other humanitarian and development organizations.

39. Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse activities and indicators are integrated in partnership cooperation agreement documents and processes for monitoring and programme reviews, helping to make protection from sexual exploitation and abuse part of regular conversations and follow-up with partners. In Mozambique, UNICEF supported the development of risk reduction plans aimed at strengthening partners’ capacities to establish safe and accessible community-based complaints mechanisms and safely refer potential victims of sexual exploitation and abuse to service providers in a timely manner. In the Philippines, UNICEF worked with 38 CSO partners on policy development to help them understand their obligations regarding protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

40. To further accelerate protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and strengthen inter-agency systems and coordination, including with Member States, in close collaboration with the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse, in 2023 UNICEF continued to lead the development of a global framework for cooperation with Governments. The framework aims to establish a shared commitment and areas of collaboration on prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse, technical capacity development support to Governments and promote a system-wide approach. A proposal to have a protection from sexual exploitation and abuse clause included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework was presented to the High-level Steering Group in 2023, with a plan to finalize and roll out the revised Framework in 2024.

41. Efforts to advance Governments' commitment and accountability to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse also advanced at the country level. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UNICEF supported the Government in establishing a hotline and formulated a protection from sexual exploitation and abuse policy and code of conduct for government staff, while the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action and National Solidarity issued a circular note on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse obligations among its staff.

D. Efforts to address sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment across UNICEF are continuously strengthened, including through reinforced capacity and evidence-based and risk-informed approaches

42. Benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Regular sexual exploitation and abuse risk assessments inform prevention and response strategies;

(b) Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse/sexual harassment focal points and/or dedicated protection from sexual exploitation and abuse specialists are appointed at headquarters, regional and country levels;

(c) All staff and complementary personnel complete mandatory training and/or briefing on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse;

(d) Reference checking and vetting for prior misconduct is systematically carried out as part of recruitment processes.

43. UNICEF scaled up investment in protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacity at all levels. In 2023, \$15.6 million was allocated to establish protection from sexual exploitation and abuse positions and to support protection from sexual exploitation and abuse programming in 20 countries and three regional offices. In addition, for Level 3 and Level 2 emergencies, emergency programme funds are automatically designated to scale up protection from sexual exploitation and abuse interventions. These dedicated funds spurred additional progress on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and accelerated interventions and systems for prevention and response. At the time of writing, UNICEF has established 35 dedicated protection from sexual exploitation and abuse specialist posts, most of which are in country offices engaged in humanitarian response and regional offices. In addition, 96 per cent of all country offices have appointed protection from sexual exploitation and abuse focal points, including at the field office level.

44. To support protection from and response to sexual exploitation and abuse, all UNICEF country offices are required to develop protection from sexual exploitation and abuse action plans. Such action plans are expected to define operational and

programmatic roles and responsibilities across management, human resources, partnerships and programmes, and outline how offices are implementing the UNICEF Core Commitments for Children on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and UNICEF inter-agency contributions. For the 2023 period, 113 out of 129 (86 per cent) country offices had such action plans in place, and 78 offices (60 per cent) had their action plan implemented, monitored and updated, compared to 75 offices (58 per cent) in 2022. Two regions – Western and Central Africa and South Asia – saw 100 per cent of the country offices in their regions develop such action plans for 2023.

45. UNICEF integrates protection from sexual exploitation and abuse across different programming sectors through gender-based violence/sexual exploitation and abuse risk assessments and risk mitigation, and invests in gender-sensitive and child-centred approaches. For example, in South Sudan, UNICEF analysed data from 102 health facilities using health facility assessment and safety audit tools to inform priorities for gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse risk mitigation. In other places, UNICEF conducted community consultations, especially with women and girls, during the process of designing and implementing safe, accessible and trusted sexual exploitation and abuse reporting channels, taking into consideration specific needs, preferences and risks present within local contexts. For example, in Lebanon, UNICEF organized focus group discussions with women and girls about their safety, working with communities to identify risk mitigation measures and follow up on community feedback for designing reporting channels that meet their needs. In Mali, UNICEF conducted analysis of community perceptions and barriers to sexual exploitation and abuse reporting to inform a child- and gender-sensitive reporting model. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in consultation with communities, UNICEF designed a comic book targeting adolescents in local languages to raise awareness of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and expanded community-based complaint mechanisms for reporting sexual exploitation and abuse to 15 provinces.

46. In relation to awareness and capacity of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse among UNICEF personnel, UNICEF has a mandatory online protection from sexual exploitation and abuse training course for staff and complementary personnel. In 2023, 94 per cent reported that they had completed training on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse before arriving at their current duty station or before taking up employment at the duty station, and 82 per cent stated that they had received training on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse over the past 12 months.

47. As a result of this, awareness of the prohibition of sexual exploitation and abuse is high among UNICEF personnel. Just under 97 per cent of the 5,405 respondents to the 2023 protection from sexual exploitation and abuse survey stated that they are aware that having sex with a sex worker, regardless of the legality of such an act in the country of their duty station, is “not acceptable”, and 99.5 per cent know that it is “not acceptable” for United Nations staff to have a sexual relationship with someone under the age of 18 years.

48. To continuously strengthen capacity and stay updated on evolving issues and effective prevention and response strategies for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, UNICEF has cultivated a robust “community of practice”, bringing together hundreds of staff from across regions to share insights and promising practices, and to innovate and work together to solve emerging challenges on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. Through regular discussions, webinars and knowledge-sharing sessions, this collaborative support system not only promotes ongoing staff capacity development, but also reinforces a culture of accountability.

49. As part of the recruitment process, UNICEF applies measures including signalling its values and standards when it comes to safeguarding and sexual

exploitation and abuse in job advertisements, self-disclosure questionnaires, assessment questions, and reference and background checks. The background checks include searching for candidates' past experience in the United Nations-wide ClearCheck database, which records United Nations personnel accused of sexual harassment, exploitation or abuse who were terminated for substantiated allegations, or who refused to cooperate in their investigation and resigned. In 2023, 626 candidates were screened by UNICEF against the database, with zero "hits", meaning that they were not individuals who had a previously known record of sexual exploitation and abuse or misconduct. Seven former UNICEF staff members were placed in the ClearCheck database. UNICEF received 114 verification requests from other United Nations entities, with zero "hits".

50. In relation to management of staff and exploring ethical issues, including safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, the recently updated performance management system in UNICEF contains clearer performance indicators for all staff and managers relating to ethical behaviour, prompting conversations on organizational culture and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in feedback discussions.

51. Prompted by Executive Board decision 2023/10, inviting UNICEF to improve its vetting practices and to consider piloting the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, a comprehensive baseline assessment of UNICEF human resources safeguarding practices will be undertaken in 2024 by the UNICEF Evaluation Office in close coordination with the Safeguarding team of the UNICEF Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring and the UNICEF Division of Human Resources. The scope of the assessment includes all stages of recruitment, onboarding and performance management of staff. It aims to understand the degree of safeguarding considerations in UNICEF human resource processes and procedures and provide organizational learning on how to improve work processes. Specific considerations of the feasibility of UNICEF becoming part of the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme will be explored as part of this assessment.

52. In relation to the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, it can be noted that OIAI, as part of its standard recommendation to all implementing partner sexual exploitation and abuse closures, now encourages partners to consider participation in the Scheme and to share its findings regarding the perpetrator's misconduct with current or future employers of the perpetrator.

E. Quality, victim/survivor-centred support is operationalized

53. Benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Assistance for victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is provided in accordance with established protocols and standards [including the United Nations protocol on the provision of assistance to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse (Victims Assistance Protocol), victim/survivor-centred approach, and gender-based violence and child protection referral pathways];

(b) The implementation of the United Nations Victims Assistance Protocol is strengthened at country level.

54. UNICEF provided support and follow-up to all survivors who reported allegations, whether or not the case was substantiated, in line with the survivor/victim-centred approach and standards outlined in the United Nations Victims Assistance Protocol. Assistance to victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse is provided as part of regular gender-based violence and child protection programming at UNICEF.

55. To strengthen response and assistance to survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse, UNICEF continued to provide training and technical support to UNICEF partners and the United Nations/humanitarian country teams and in-country protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordination mechanisms to roll out the Victims Assistance Protocol. Countries trained on the Protocol in 2023 included Afghanistan, Chad and the Philippines. To date, 15 United Nations country teams/humanitarian country teams were supported with training, and over 1,750 protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence and child protection practitioners have received training or an orientation on the Protocol and technical note.

56. In 2023, 64 countries where the United Nations is present have developed protection from sexual exploitation and abuse standard operating procedures at inter-agency level that meet the standards outlined in the Victims Assistance Protocol. Of those, 18 have fully rolled out the procedures, which means that procedures are followed for initiating and processing referrals of survivors to appropriate assistance and services; trainings are conducted on the procedures for safe and confidential referrals in line with the survivor-centred approach; and gaps in assistance coverage are monitored and addressed. While noting the progress in strengthening the procedures on victim assistance, offices have flagged the lack of inter-agency resources for implementation of standard operating procedures system-wide as a barrier to achieving full implementation of the Protocol.

57. In addition, UNICEF and IASC have begun to assess provision of victim assistance more rigorously. There is a modest improvement in countries reporting on availability of quality, standardized referrals for assistance at inter-agency level in line with the standards of the Victims Assistance Protocol. However, there is a need to scale up gender-based violence services to support survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse and their children. This will require increased investment in gender-based violence programming. Based on the 2022 UNICEF and IASC mapping exercise, only 27 per cent of the gender-based violence sector needs were funded for countries with a humanitarian response plan.

F. Inter-agency coordination and collaboration on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse are strengthened

58. Benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Entity actively contributes to the improvement of inter-agency coordination and collaboration on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse at country level, including through the development and implementation of United Nations country team protection from sexual exploitation and abuse action plans and participation of the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse focal points in the inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordination structures;

(b) Entity actively participates in and contributes to the work of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment coordination structures at global level (including the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Working Group, IASC protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment Technical Advisory Group, and the Executive Group on the Prevention and Response to Sexual Harassment).

59. UNICEF is an active member of inter-agency networks and working groups related to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse at both global and country levels, including the IASC Technical Advisory Group and the United Nations Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Working Group. As part of the Implementing Partner Protocol Working Group, UNICEF jointly launched the new United Nations Harmonized Assessment Tool for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacity assessment (see paragraph 37 above). In close collaboration with the Office of the

Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse, UNICEF continues to lead the inter-agency work to establish a system-wide global framework for cooperation with Governments, which outlines shared commitments, obligations and areas of cooperation on prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse (see paragraph 40 above).

60. A critical part of the UNICEF protection from sexual exploitation and abuse work in all contexts is supporting the coordinated efforts of the United Nations, Governments and civil society. As part of its overall technical support and capacity development initiatives, UNICEF is supporting the inter-agency system to generate data and evidence and monitor inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordination and systems to effectively deliver on the priority outcomes and build knowledge of evidence-based approaches for prevention and response. This is critical to strengthening humanitarian system-wide coordination and coherence and to meeting the IASC protection from sexual exploitation and abuse commitments. In 2023, this work included updating the IASC Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Risk Overview index, a global tool that categorizes and measures the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in countries with humanitarian responses to support the donors and the broader humanitarian community to make strategic decisions about resource allocation for priority issues and high-risk countries.

61. In addition, UNICEF led the annual IASC mapping exercise to track collective inter-agency progress on core protection from sexual exploitation and abuse indicators among 33 countries and produced the IASC global dashboard analysing and visualizing mapping results to support humanitarian coordinators and United Nations country teams to make data-informed management decisions on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. The dashboard presents comparative data among countries and longitudinal analysis of key protection from sexual exploitation and abuse indicators, and is the only global platform where donors, the United Nations country teams/humanitarian country teams and the humanitarian community at large can access key information on countries' progress on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. The 2022 IASC mapping found that the inter-agency country-level networks continue to play a pivotal role for improving existing systems for preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse. Despite challenges in accessing funding and resources to sustain inter-agency efforts on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, countries have progressed towards the achievement of core indicators.

62. UNICEF also continued to manage and develop the IASC protection from sexual exploitation and abuse global website, which has to date served over 170,000 practitioners, by making global inter-agency guidance, tools and resources more widely available, facilitating sharing of good practices, and promoting a results-based approach to evidence generation and progress tracking.

63. Other examples of inter-agency collaboration include joint work by in-country protection from sexual exploitation and abuse networks in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Poland and the Republic of Moldova, where UNICEF collaborated with others to provide support in building the investigative capacity of implementing partners, resulting in the establishment of trained pools of investigators.

G. Culture change that addresses the root causes of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is advanced

64. Benchmarks measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Organizational culture and behaviour change to end sexual misconduct are actively promoted and form an organizational priority;

(b) Staff perception and engagement surveys inform the actions to improve the organizational culture.

65. Upholding a commitment to “zero tolerance” against sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment is part of the organizational culture at UNICEF. Efforts to make this known to staff are reflected in the high level of awareness, as described above under section D, and demonstrate belief in the organization’s ability to address misconduct and wrong-doing. It is encouraging that 72 per cent of staff respondents to the 2023 protection from sexual exploitation and abuse survey state that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement that the organization takes seriously the zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse.

66. A stronger narrative is evident about making safeguarding, including protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, part of the UNICEF commitment to child rights and to reinforce the importance of how UNICEF personnel and associates embody these values, both in “how” the organization operates and through its partnerships. Advancing safeguarding, inclusive of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, as an organizational priority and making UNICEF a safe organization for the people it serves means applying principles and practices of safeguarding in personal and professional actions, and in programmes, partnerships and operations. Such action is a concrete way of demonstrating a belief in human rights and helps to progress the UNICEF child rights agenda.

67. UNICEF regularly monitors organizational culture and workforce gender parity, recognizing their importance in promoting behaviour change and an enabling environment where sexual misconduct is addressed in a timely and effective way, and safeguarding is promoted as an organizational priority. Employee engagement surveys such as the Global Staff Survey and the Pulse Check on Workplace Culture are disaggregated by gender to equip offices with evidence and inform the design of initiatives to tackle behaviours that create a culture permissive to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. Follow-up conversations with low-scoring and most-deteriorated scoring offices are held, where offices are given targeted advice to allow them to address areas of concern.

68. Two questions on standards of conduct and on psychological safety and trust provide relevant insights. In the last Pulse Check in November 2023, it is positive to note that 67 per cent of participants agreed that colleagues consistently behave in line with UNICEF core values and United Nations Standards of Conduct towards one another, communities and the children UNICEF serves. About 60 per cent of participants reacted positively to the statement of feeling safe to raise concerns, questions and issues with managers. This was, however, a 10-percentage point decrease compared to the 2022 Global Staff Survey, indicating a decline in psychological safety and trust. Reasons behind the decline are difficult to assess with certainty. Possible underlying factors may include challenges to the role of the United Nations in child rights crises and UNICEF offices experiencing organizational changes. The next Global Staff Survey will take place in 2024 and will provide a comprehensive dataset to check progress and provide further insights for actions.

69. The new Safeguarding Policy of 4 March 2024 is being introduced within UNICEF, recognizing the recent results of the Pulse Check survey and linking safeguarding with the organizational culture and child rights agenda. The internal communication campaign that is being designed to support the roll-out of the Policy recognizes that safeguarding is about how UNICEF prevents anyone coming to any harm as a result of their contact with the organization. A core message in the communication campaign for the organizational roll-out of the new Policy is: *“We all have a role in safeguarding, whether proactively responding to risks, raising concerns, or making informed decisions about our daily actions. It is raising our voice*

when we see or experience something that might lead to harm, inside or outside UNICEF. Because if not you, who?"

IV. Next steps

70. In 2023, UNICEF made consistent progress in its long-term approach to prevent and address sexual exploitation and abuse. The Strategic Plan indicators and the benchmarks used for this report demonstrate good progress made in a number of areas and yield insights about strengths, weaknesses and needs associated with the approach that UNICEF takes, together with its partners.

71. Positive findings include continued strong commitment at all levels of the organization to prevent and reduce the risk of harm to all persons as a result of their contact with UNICEF. Framing protection from sexual exploitation and abuse as part of a renewed commitment to safeguarding and its strengthened, integrated enterprise risk management approach helps to amplify the efforts and UNICEF-wide actions for the cause, while maintaining clear roles and responsibilities for specific technical areas of work. Roll-out of the new Safeguarding Policy in 2024 will be key in this regard.

72. Preventing and mitigating risks of sexual exploitation and abuse will require continued investment in staff awareness and capacity to work with partners implementing programmes, vendors and other associates of UNICEF in upholding expected standards of practices. A full transition to the United Nations methodology for CSO partner capacity assessment and raising awareness of safeguarding among partners will be key. In relation to vendors, continued work to refine methodologies for staff capacity to manage safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse-related risks with vendors is expected.

73. Also related to UNICEF personnel, the results of the baseline assessment of safeguarding in human resource practices that is currently being undertaken will be important to determine next steps in relation to strengthening recruitment and onboarding, including background and vetting practices and considerations related to the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme.

74. It will be important to continue the positive trend with more individuals having access to safe reporting and feedback channels to raise concerns and issue reports, including of allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse. The design and piloting of more integrated complaint, feedback and redressal mechanisms will be important in this regard.

75. More financial resources are required to expand the reach and quality of services for survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse. Referral systems need improving and gender-based violence and child protection programming should be expanded to ensure that services are more readily available. Additional resources are also needed to fully deliver on UNICEF commitments to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, including to implement prioritized actions as part of the country-level protection from sexual exploitation and abuse action plans.

76. UNICEF will continue to actively collaborate with other agencies and organizations and to lead on a number of important inter-agency initiatives to advance the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse agenda globally and at the country level. Strong coordination with the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse and IASC globally will be key. The United Nations common assessment for implementing partners and the roll-out of the Victims Assistance Protocol will advance common standards.

V. Draft decision

The Executive Board

1. *Welcomes* the update provided by UNICEF on progress made on preventing and protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse within the broader safeguarding framework and emerging strengthened enterprise risk management;
 2. *Requests* UNICEF to provide an update to the Executive Board at the annual session of 2025 on how the organization is advancing its different efforts to effectively prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.
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