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**Midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021:  
Lessons learned**

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## I. Introduction

1. This paper reviews the lessons learned from the first two years of implementation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021. It complements the report on the midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 and annual report for 2019 of the Executive Director of UNICEF, including its annexed report on the implementation of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system.

2. The lessons presented here are drawn from a significantly larger compendium, which was collated from evaluations and other sources published since approval of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 by the Executive Board in September 2017. They cover the lessons learned in achieving results for children in the main programmatic areas and cross-cutting priorities of the Strategic Plan, and in other critical and emerging dimensions of the work of UNICEF at all levels, including learning on the enablers and change strategies presented in the Strategic Plan. Because these lessons were a formative component of the entire midterm review process of analysis and planning, some of these lessons, along with the corresponding remedial actions identified in the main report, will also appear in this annex.

3. The evidence that has informed these lessons comes from a range of sources, including:

- (a) independent evaluations and syntheses of the work of UNICEF;
- (b) research and studies by UNICEF and partner organizations on programmatic and operational issues;
- (c) annual reports and other periodic reporting by UNICEF country offices, regional offices and headquarters divisions; and
- (d) direct engagement and consultation with key informants at headquarters and regional offices.

4. Some of the most-referenced source documents are listed at the end of this paper.

5. The lessons learned are informing the organization's planned work for the remainder of the current Strategic Plan period, as well as the preparations for the next four-year plan for 2022–2025. While the sources have been drawn from experiences documented and published during the current Strategic Plan period, between 2018 and early 2020, they may reflect learning from activities and strategies implemented prior to this period. This time lag between lessons learned on the ground and documented evidence often means that while many of the lessons may have already informed programming, others may still be relatively new and be incorporated through the midterm review, and/or subsequently through the development of the next UNICEF Strategic Plan. This paper attempts to highlight the lessons that remain most relevant; section V on looking forward identifies salient lessons for the remainder of the Strategic Plan period and beyond.

6. The timing of this submission has not allowed for the incorporation of lessons relating to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic or the UNICEF response, which will have a strong influence on the organization's interventions during the rest of the Strategic Plan period. This issue is also addressed in section V of this paper. In addition, a separate background paper on the UNICEF response to the COVID-19 pandemic is also being presented the annual session of the Executive Board.

7. This paper is organized into four sections, with the lessons learned on the cross-cutting area of gender equality embedded throughout the document.

(a) Section 1 presents a summary of some overarching lessons in the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

(b) Sections 2 focuses on lessons related to the main programmatic areas of the Strategic Plan.

(c) Section 3 focuses on lessons related to UNICEF humanitarian action.

(d) Section 4 outlines how UNICEF is responding and will respond to these lessons in preparation for the development of the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, as well as in the implementation of the remainder of the current Strategic Plan period.

## II. Overarching lessons

8. As reaffirmed in the report on the midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 and annual report for 2019 of the Executive Director of UNICEF, a human rights-based approach, grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, continues to guide the work of UNICEF. This approach defines the organization's duty and unique role to advocate for child rights globally, both within the United Nations system and with partners. Utilizing a rights-based approach to programming – with the Convention and other human rights instruments used to frame and ground all activities – is a matter of both ethics and effectiveness, as it has been shown to produce better quality outcomes. This is not in itself a lesson, but a point of reference from which other lessons emerge through the work of UNICEF.

9. UNICEF knows that advocacy with partners, including those in the private sector, and further training for its own staff, are effective means of reinforcing the rights-based approach across sectors. The organization reflects this approach in its language and messaging, and strives to use purposeful language that denominates children and their caregivers as “rights holders” rather than beneficiaries or victims, and UNICEF and other service providers as “duty bearers”. The consistent use of key concepts and approaches takes time and sustained effort to ensure they are uniformly understood and reliably embedded across a large, diverse and complex organization such as UNICEF. Maintaining that underlying consistency is best secured through vigilance and investment. The importance of clear, consistent definitions, and explicit organizational endorsement to create shared understanding and consistent application is recognized as the foundation for mainstreaming such principles across the UNICEF culture and systems. This is true for child rights as well as for other key concepts and approaches, such as gender equality, accountability and systems strengthening.

10. The evaluation of the UNICEF Gender Action Plans over the period 2014–2019 is shifting UNICEF towards adopting a transformational approach to gender equity, with a focus on the structural and cultural determinants of gender inequality. To support this shift, UNICEF has developed clear terminology and positioning on the concepts of gender equality and gender transformation. These will need to be further understood and operationalized across the organization through additional commitments from senior managers, and the identification of clear pathways from institutional reform to implementation. The guidance, tools and strategy notes accompanying the Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021 are expected to enable country offices to adopt a contextualized gender-mainstreaming approach to programming, but these changes have not yet been fully documented or evaluated.

11. Reliable data is a catalyst for improving results, strengthening the design of policies and programmes, increasing the availability and quality of services, and affecting the triggering, design, targeting and implementation of emergency

responses. But persistent gaps in the availability and quality of disaggregated data for many child-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators have presented serious challenges. The lack of consistent data disaggregation, beyond sex and age, has made it difficult to target and track results for specific vulnerable groups. With data collection often more focused on the coverage of interventions rather than their quality or equity, there is still a significant gap in evidence on how and why disadvantage and exclusion arise, which creates challenges for the development of programmes that can address them on a systemic level. Disparate data collection and monitoring systems limit the use of data for learning and decision-making in humanitarian settings, and weaken the evidence base for programming, advocacy, innovation and resource mobilization.

12. UNICEF recognizes that a sustainable solution to this challenge comes from strengthened national statistical and data ecosystems. Large statistical operations, such as population and housing censuses, nationally representative household surveys and administrative data systems, are indispensable sources of representative, robust data that provide much-needed disaggregated data for evidence-based policymaking. These initiatives are being enhanced by reductions in reporting timelines and the introduction of real-time reporting solutions, which have substantially improved the timeliness and lowered the cost of the UNICEF-supported multiple indicator cluster surveys. Evidence shows that increased investments and adequate political support can empower national statistical systems to innovate and harness the opportunities offered by new technologies and data sources, and to place greater emphasis on equity measurement and tracking through the use of disaggregated data.

13. To unleash the full potential of data to advance children's rights, it is essential to embed a culture of data demand, supply and use throughout and beyond UNICEF. Assembling a diverse coalition of advocates has proven key to the success of these efforts, as has support to government partners to strengthen systems to capture, analyse and use data, for example through the multiple indicator cluster surveys, capacity development in mortality estimation, application of survey data in policymaking in the education sector, and collection and use of child-related data at community level. Optimizing the sharing and use of available data across partnerships has been identified as a low-cost, high-return solution through the midterm review and other evaluations and reports reviewed for this paper. UNICEF is working to strengthen partnership systems to facilitate data sharing. For example, a UNICEF Supply Division collaboration with the secretariat of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance to improve their partnership processes will enable harmonized forecasting activities, and result in optimized use of their respective intelligence on the required and available data.

14. UNICEF has recognized that embedding a systems-strengthening approach across the agency starts with clarity regarding objectives and the desired balance and connections between issue- and systems-based approaches, with a clear case made for how, when and why systems strengthening is a sound investment to achieve programming goals. UNICEF has recognized the importance of investment in specific capacities, skills, systems and structures to mainstream systems strengthening and ensure that it is addressed in planning and reporting at all levels. Successful mainstreaming involves clear commitment at the highest levels of the organization, and dedicated support for country offices to contextualize systems strengthening in their programmes, and to develop the capacity, resources and partnerships to support it. The skills required – including in public finance, child-friendly budgeting, public service management, and information and data management – reaffirm the relevance of stronger cross-cutting capacity development strategies, another key lesson that has proven instrumental in the UNICEF approach to accelerating key results for children through the midterm review process.

15. The midterm review highlighted the importance of high-quality, flexible and predictable resources, which UNICEF has learned are critical for systems strengthening. Long-term, flexible funding relationships underlie effective work in systems strengthening, yet UNICEF often has to be responsive to opportunities in order to secure funding, and major financial partners often tend to distribute funds with an issue-based focus. This lack of flexible funding can lead to fragmentation of work and undermine systems-strengthening efforts. UNICEF can address this by making the business case for systems strengthening to donors, based on well-documented examples that link the approach to tangible results for children and highlight the risks of implementing activities in countries with weak systems. It is also acting on this lesson by working with partners to strengthen the case for more regular resources, as highlighted in the report on the midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 and annual report for 2019 of the Executive Director of UNICEF.

16. UNICEF partnerships are increasing broadening and deepening the organization's reach, engagement, knowledge and effectiveness, and the relevance and ownership of its interventions. Sustained, strategic partnerships have boosted efficiency and advanced longer-term system strengthening and capacity-building objectives. Partnerships with the private sector are expanding, enabling UNICEF to leverage the resources, influence and reach of businesses where these align with organizational priorities, and to strengthen private sector commitments to uphold child rights. Strategically involving the private sector in the early stages of programme design has enriched discussions, promoted innovation and strengthened relationships. To address uneven capacity and varied approaches that have limited the effectiveness of private sector partnerships, and to avoid reputational risk, UNICEF has taken steps to support country offices with agile and pragmatic guidance, in line with child rights and business principles, on building partnerships with different types of private entities.

17. UNICEF is increasingly engaging children and young people as agents of change, especially through social media channels such as U-Report and Instagram, and through youth networks around issues such as female genital mutilation. Effective programming and approaches are guided by strategies tailored to engage different age groups, with older adolescents utilized as peer educators. Responding to the lessons learned, and as noted in the midterm review, UNICEF is working to extend young people's participation in UNICEF initiatives beyond dedicated spaces and activities, to systematically integrate their involvement in programme design, planning, monitoring and decision-making, as well as policy advocacy. UNICEF is taking steps to develop stronger guidance and strengthen staff capacity to further engage young people and their communities in ways that are timely, respectful of local cultures, and ensure the meaningful and safe participation of vulnerable groups.

18. As UNICEF works to strengthen the mainstreaming of gender across its work, it is incorporating mounting evidence that a singular focus on girls is not sufficient to address the structural and normative challenges they face in exercising their rights. Boys and men can be engaged as champions for gender equality or beneficiaries of interventions to promote social norm change, and UNICEF is taking lessons from successful programmes and campaigns such as MenCare – which works with men and boys on fatherhood and child care, aiming to shift gender norms and biases – to further define the potential role of men and boys in gender-transformative programming. Sharing such good practices more widely and actively can support their wider use, advance women's empowerment, provide women and girls with platforms to articulate their priorities, and engage men and boys to listen and account for their role in gender transformation.

19. UNICEF has learned that complex and interconnected barriers, such as those resulting from gender discrimination, require coordinated investment and intervention across sectors to achieve meaningful results and transform the lives of girls and boys. Integrated approaches to gender equity have coalesced around life cycle stages, such as adolescence, issues such as child marriage, or geographical areas. This has enabled coordinated investment and intervention across sectors, as intersectoral teams develop joint theories of change and integrate work towards common objectives and outputs. Evidence continues to show that multisectoral approaches strengthen the efficiency, credibility and visibility of UNICEF, and the relevance and ownership of its interventions. They provide opportunities to ensure that the rights and needs of children are taken into account by other actors and in shared responses.

20. The integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals has highlighted the effectiveness of multisectoral and inter-agency approaches to deliver on children's rights. UNICEF has achieved good results from intersectoral work at different levels, from sharing and consolidating evidence, or coordinating activities in the same location, to purposeful and facilitated coordination around shared outputs or outcomes. Regional reports have showcased the merits of different approaches to strengthen intersectoral work by integrating planning across sectors through regional planning or results frameworks. For example, UNICEF offices have identified entry points for various sectors to support girls' education outcomes and integrate programme delivery in their country programme documents; adding a single outcome for delivering results for adolescents, with contributions from several sectors; or even strengthening cross-sectoral programming, joint theories of change and joint support missions to country programmes through common result areas.

21. These efforts have not always been successful. UNICEF has learned that leadership and investment are key to the success of multisectoral programming, to facilitate cooperation and to develop accountability and oversight mechanisms to reflect the contributions of multiple sectors. They also help to build evidence to demonstrate the added value of a multisectoral approach to tackle the multidisciplinary and intersectional dimensions of poverty and inequality. This is a lesson that UNICEF is sharing with other United Nations agencies, including to inform the design of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). Lessons from humanitarian contexts have shown that, in addition to formal joint planning and communication mechanisms, paying attention to informal relationships improves results. United Nations reform is also continuing to mitigate the challenges of inter-agency work, particularly the strengthened role of the resident coordinator and the new guidance on UNSDCFs.

22. The Sustainable Development Goals framework has boosted the potential of UNICEF to strengthen child rights in United Nations system-wide policies, procedures and accountability mechanisms. United Nations partnerships and coordinated action are increasingly critical to deliver on children's rights, given the multidisciplinary nature of the Sustainable Development Goals and the new United Nations cooperation framework. There is clear evidence that an inter-agency approach to programming can strengthen efficiency, results, credibility and visibility, and is highly valued by diverse stakeholders. While functional and effective coordination between agencies can increase effectiveness, it may also increase management and coordination costs. Evidence shows that the most effective and efficient efforts are those that recognize and integrate the strengths and mandates of each agency, but the means of establishing those comparative strengths are not always straightforward. Where this emerges as a challenge, a key lesson learned is to leverage successful United Nations reform efforts to ensure a coherent programmatic outcome. Coordination around issues or themes at the country or regional level can show great promise, not just pragmatically but also in terms of strategic impact (some examples

are presented in the joint annex on the common chapter of the Strategic Plans 2018–2021 of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN-Women (the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women).

23. The documentation and sharing of good practices in effective joint work between United Nations agencies, including through the common chapter, are making United Nations reform processes more efficient and effective. The experiences of joint programmes, such as those of UNFPA and UNICEF, add substantial value, while robust evaluations of collaborative processes – including strategic, joint and country-led evaluations – play a key role in testing assumptions and providing evidence of good practices. Through work on the common chapter, UNICEF and its partners have learned several important lessons, not least with regard to the challenges of attributing change to one component in a much broader spectrum of United Nations reform efforts since 2017.

24. In relation to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, further system-wide efforts to share learning and consolidate findings and recommendations across agencies can improve accountability and follow-up. UNICEF has had a serious reckoning with its own organizational culture over the past two years. Lessons include a realization of the extent to which a hierarchical structure and risk-averse culture can inhibit innovation, learning and accountability in an organization, including by creating a tendency to “play down” messages that might be perceived as criticism or failure. The organization recognizes that accountability is weakened when staff are reluctant to report suspected cases of sexual exploitation and abuse, due to a lack of trust that the leadership will take action, or due to fear of exposure or retaliation. As outlined in the midterm review, UNICEF has taken measures to improve its organizational culture, by encouraging staff to live its core values in their daily behaviours, emphasizing people management skills, promoting greater understanding and accountability by staff for their behaviours, and discussing and documenting ethical dilemmas and decisions.

### **III. Lessons learned in the programme areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan**

#### **A. Every child survives and thrives**

25. Guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF works to advance every child’s right to health and well-being and to develop to their full potential, giving priority to the most disadvantaged and making sure that children and adolescents have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives. The lessons learned from evaluations and reviews in this programmatic area have indicated good results from a focus on strengthening national systems, a nuanced analysis of the socioeconomic determinants of inequities, and targeted, context-specific, multisectoral programming to address the multiple vulnerabilities faced by the most disadvantaged children and adolescents. The successes highlighted by these lessons have been factored into UNICEF strategies for the final two years of the Strategic Plan (2020 and 2021), in accordance with the focus of the midterm review on accelerating key results for children. Some other lessons that show where success has been harder to achieve have been equally valued in the midterm review process.

26. Weak national health systems and capacities have been found to hamper progress towards a range of health results, from reducing maternal mortality and increasing coverage of primary health care to reaching children with immunization and nutrition interventions – with particular challenges in protracted crises and during public health emergencies. The emerging lesson is that providing effective support to

countries' health systems will take a clear, long-term, United Nations system-wide vision to guide the strengthening of policy frameworks, health worker capacity, national standards and service quality. It is a timely lesson. Likewise, when implementing interventions in countries with weaker health systems, UNICEF has achieved better results by sharing information on the risks involved with donors and key partners, and agreeing on a division of responsibilities and accountabilities. This is an additional lesson that will be taken forward beyond the midterm review.

27. Based on mounting evidence that food-based approaches to nutrition are more sustainable than traditional health-based interventions, the organization's nutrition work has shifted to building food systems and capacities that are sensitive to children's nutritional needs. The greater complexity and long-term nature of these approaches has brought new challenges for resource mobilization and advocacy, which UNICEF is addressing by building evidence of their value. The organization's advocacy agenda for nutrition has shifted and expanded to cover multiple burdens, including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency and obesity. In particular, as evidence of the commercial and socioeconomic determinants of obesity grows – along with government awareness, requests and action – UNICEF has recognized the importance of strengthening its advocacy on addressing the environments that contribute to obesity among children. This lesson is being taken on as the organization moves into and beyond the last two years of the Strategic Plan.

28. In the areas of health and nutrition, UNICEF has learned that an in-depth exploration of the social determinants of inequalities, and of the factors that affect the demand for services, is key to strengthening programming. It is especially relevant to issues that affect the uptake of health services by women and girls. Differentiated and innovative approaches that address multiple vulnerabilities are also key to outreach and services for adolescents. UNICEF experience shows that the use of innovative technology (for example, U-Report) during emergencies, as well as localized mobile phone solutions, can increase adolescents' awareness of menstrual hygiene management and sexual and reproductive health, as well as their access to services.

29. With regard to gender equity, good practice has been noted in the area of HIV, based on an analysis of intersectional factors that shape gendered vulnerabilities, and with longstanding approaches to involving men and boys. Other sectors, including nutrition and immunization, continue to focus more on equity of access and coverage. For example, gender analysis in immunization programmes has tended to focus on differential rates of vaccination of boys and girls, rather than on the impact of household gender imbalances on vaccination decision-making or how societal, ethnic and religious gender patterns influence perceptions and uptake. The risk remains that, overall, staff continue to adopt an "equal participation" approach to gender in programming in health and nutrition, rather than to address structural changes that will transform gender-related norms.

30. Understanding the multiple vulnerabilities faced by children, adolescents and young people at risk of HIV has emerged as key to UNICEF efforts to address HIV/AIDS. As UNICEF projections show that the global targets for ending AIDS in children are far from being reached, HIV programming is prioritizing more coordinated multisectoral efforts, and more robust disaggregated data across the continuum of care to strengthen and target the HIV response, especially for adolescents. UNICEF has achieved solid results by implementing differentiated programming to respond to diverse contexts, an approach that has been adopted by major partners, including the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, to improve the focus of their own grant-making. In response to a widespread lack of resources for HIV, including an 80 per cent reduction in Joint United Nations Programme on

HIV/AIDS allocations to UNICEF since the start of the Strategic Plan, UNICEF has highlighted its own role in ensuring that global funds for adolescent girls and young women are invested in evidence-based, high-impact HIV interventions. The organization has learned to maximize and maintain its continued effectiveness through flexibility and creativity, as well as working hard to ensure that financing is secured where needed, even when the funds are not for UNICEF programmes.

31. UNICEF has built its leadership in integrated early childhood development (ECD) interventions in emergencies – and demonstrated the importance of early learning and stimulation through play in these contexts – through provision of kits to ECD centres that reach vulnerable women and children. To remedy gaps in access to ECD materials among children with disabilities, UNICEF has learned to emphasize intersectoral collaboration and shared accountability to coordinate work across different service platforms, including to address discrimination faced by the parents of children with disabilities. UNICEF has recognized the potential to strengthen its ECD work in emergencies, and to provide support to country offices to help them to reach children with disabilities, by clarifying its position on the importance of high-quality play opportunities in emergencies, including for children with disabilities; conducting advocacy in this area; and providing health and education staff with clear guidance on how to support children with disabilities through play.

## **B. Every child learns**

32. In the era of the Millennium Development Goals, a narrow understanding of universal basic education equated equal access with equal outcomes. In line with a rights-based approach and the more integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals, UNICEF has shifted the focus of its education work towards equitable access to quality basic education, with success measured not only by enrolment and retention rates, but also by learning outcomes and relevance, and children's well-being. To assess large-scale and complex sector-wide initiatives, UNICEF is seeking experimental methodologies to explore how components fit together to achieve sustainable, system-level change. The lessons learned from evaluations and reviews of UNICEF work in this programme area have been integrated into the midterm review and the UNICEF education strategy. They have highlighted the importance of approaches to educational exclusion that are grounded in clear definitions and an analysis of its mechanics, guided by a focus on systemic change. The organization has also learned that these approaches need to be implemented with sufficient guidance and capacity-building for staff, as well as a judicious approach to forming and managing partnerships.

33. UNICEF education interventions have been effective in addressing exclusion when they are able to identify and challenge the mechanisms by which exclusion occurs, and use participatory methods to find appropriate solutions for excluded groups. UNICEF has institutionalized a commitment to inclusive, equitable education across its work in the sector, and the organization is orienting its resources, capacity, partnerships and advocacy towards ensuring that the education rights of the most vulnerable and marginalized children are upheld at all levels of education.

34. UNICEF has learned that clear definitions of inclusive and equitable education strengthen the targeting of interventions, sharpen measures to address exclusion and enable better measurement of outcomes for disadvantaged groups. In the case of disability-inclusive education, most country offices provide specific guidance that aligns with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but some programmes include segregated schooling, which is contrary to the fundamental right of all children to attend a singular education system. UNICEF has learned that it can contribute effectively in this area when its interventions are grounded in a coherent

and consistent understanding, framed in the Convention, of disability-inclusive education, who it includes, how it should be implemented, and when staff have clear pathways to receive guidance. This critical lesson is being taken forward through the midterm review process and into the next Strategic Plan.

35. Effective programming for gender-responsive education likewise depends on a clear, nuanced and holistic understanding of gender inequality and its impact on education, with a focus on promoting systemic change rather than solely achieving specific programmatic objectives such as gender parity or targeting girls. Successful approaches are grounded in an assessment of gender power dynamics and guided by gender-transformative strategies; involve men and boys; and define indicators of success that capture improvements in the gender-responsiveness of the learning environment. UNICEF has learned that some country-level education programmes are still struggling to translate the gender mainstreaming strategy into practical programming. As a consequence, the organization is now emphasizing strengthening the technical capacity of the relevant staff. Country offices have received guidance to enable them to contextualize and implement the Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021 and map the structural determinants of gender inequality as a basis for developing gender-responsive programming, although it is too early to see the results and level of implementation.

36. UNICEF is working to build an evidence base of effective approaches and skills to promote adolescent girls' empowerment for life and work, and to better understand how life skills approaches can be better targeted for girls. Long-term support and engagement are proving key to realizing the potential of alternative education, life skills education and programmes for accelerated learning to improve lives and livelihoods. Accordingly, and based on this learning, UNICEF is stepping up its support to country offices by providing more guidance and support on appropriate frameworks and implementation pathways for mainstreaming life skills in curricula; and strengthening the quality of data on the outcomes and impact of life-skills approaches. This key approach is also being strengthened beyond the midterm review.

### **C. Every child is protected from violence and exploitation**

37. The lessons from evaluations and reviews in this programmatic area have frequently highlighted the importance, and the associated challenges, of identifying and targeting the poorest and most marginalized children, who bear the greatest burden of protection risks, including harmful practices such as child marriage. They also highlight the importance of clearly framing the concepts – and intersections – of violence and harmful practices in terms of human rights and child rights. Programmatic learning often shows that the most effective interventions to tackle harmful practices are rooted in local culture and practices, and target the most relevant drivers of vulnerability while retaining cultural acceptability.

38. The multidimensional nature of child protection issues means that collaborative research and solutions across sectors and agencies, and a recognition of how vulnerabilities intersect, are key to achieving good results. For example, the same factors that drive girls' vulnerability to child marriage or gender-based violence often also exclude them from education or access to sexual and reproductive health services. Changing social norms, for example to eliminate female genital mutilation, depends on mutually reinforcing contributions and messages from diverse actors across levels and sectors, from grass-roots organizations with an understanding of local social dynamics, to decision makers who can codify changes in new laws and policies. UNICEF has learned that because abstract concepts may be interpreted differently across sectors and partners, giving them a practical meaning is a prerequisite to developing a common foundation for effective joint work.

39. In 2015, the child protection sector was among the first in UNICEF to develop a gender-transformative vision with an explicit focus on girls' rights and the transformation of gendered social norms across country programmes. As a consequence, many programmes are now seeking to strengthen engagement of men and boys to challenge gendered social norms, promote positive masculinities and advance the empowerment of women and girls. UNICEF has prioritized building a stronger evidence base around gender-transformative approaches and developing metrics to track progress towards the transformation of norms. Linked to that, the organization has learned that providing guidance and learning opportunities for staff and partners, to better understand the key underlying concepts and how to put them into practice, are key to the success of these efforts.

40. UNICEF is committed to supporting the strengthening of child protection systems for the long-term, sustainable fulfilment of child rights. However, progress has been uneven, with stark gaps in low-income, fragile and humanitarian contexts, primarily as a result of gaps in capacity-building and policy advocacy. Increased leadership and guidance on how to balance and connect issue- and systems-based approaches have proven critical to enable staff to achieve good results, as has capacity-building in newer areas of work, such as child-friendly budgeting and strengthening the fiscal space. UNICEF has also learned that new funding relationships are essential to promote longer-term flexible funding streams and to overcome issue-based, fragmented models of child protection systems strengthening. Strong evidence of the added value of child protection systems strengthening, including workforce capacity-building, and building global platforms to coordinate efforts, can accelerate progress.

41. Protecting children without parental care is a critical priority for UNICEF, and the consensus that has evolved prioritizes the role of families, providing high-quality alternative care and preventing institutional care. Certain vulnerable groups of children, including children with disabilities, are at increased risk of being separated from their families. During the refugee and migrant response in Europe, UNICEF drew lessons from observing weaknesses in child protection systems as well as contraventions of children's rights through detention, refoulement and drawn-out asylum procedures. While heightened political sensitivity and reduced advocacy space around issues related to refugee and migrant children may limit the opportunities to raise child protection concerns and increase the risk of confrontation with government partners, UNICEF has learned from experience the importance of strengthening advocacy for holistic, multisectoral care reform, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, while continuing to invest in accurate data on children in alternative care.

42. Protecting children from online harm is increasingly important. The Internet creates enormous opportunities for children and young people, but also poses significant risks, including an increasing prevalence of online sexual abuse. While Governments and other partners around the world are still rapidly learning about the issue, UNICEF has found that legislation and enforcement are insufficient to protect children. In addition, some cybersecurity laws that were adopted to protect children have had the unintended effect of increasing censorship, thus suppressing freedom of expression and access to information. To address this issue more efficiently, UNICEF has prioritized work on online child protection through a coordinated global response as an active member of the WePROTECT Global Alliance to end child sexual exploitation online.

## **D. Every child lives in a safe and clean environment**

43. With climate change increasingly recognized as a crucial issue that deepens poverty and undermines human rights – and the focus of a growing global youth movement – UNICEF recognizes the need to do more to frame its role in supporting young people and amplifying their voices on this issue, which is so crucial in shaping the world they will inherit. A lack of funding and limited technical staff have challenged the organization’s ability to accelerate progress on its climate change work. Support from regional offices and headquarters is key to enabling UNICEF country programmes and staff to reflect on the links between climate change and child rights and to develop climate-resilient programmes and policies from a child rights perspective. Based on these and other lessons, UNICEF work on climate and environment has been highlighted in the midterm review, with progress against current targets to be accelerated – and it is an area of growing importance – and continued, long beyond the current Strategic Plan.

44. In the area of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), which accounts for most of the UNICEF work under this programmatic area, a number of salient lessons are worth highlighting, as reflected in many of the findings and recommendations of the midterm review. For example, some evidence suggests that the broad nature of the UNICEF WASH framework allows country offices to more closely align with certain elements, resulting in an increased focus on the Sustainable Development Goal 6 target to end open defecation, and less on the Sustainable Development Goal indicators of safely managed water and sanitation services for all. UNICEF has gathered evidence of approaches that will be effective in achieving a sustainable end to open defecation. These include decentralized planning and implementation to translate national targets and commitments into smaller, contextualized subprogrammes with local leadership and ownership. The early and thorough application of social norms theory was found to increase conversion rates (i.e., from practising open defecation to not practising open defecation) and boost the effectiveness and sustainability of community approaches to ending open defecation. This and other approaches and strategies have been identified and taken on through the broader midterm review process and will inform implementation during the remaining two years of the Strategic Plan.

45. UNICEF has also learned that including post-open-defecation-free activities in its programming approach helps to stabilize and reinforce new social norms, and should be implemented alongside local-level monitoring to understand progress, take action where gaps are identified, and strengthen accountability to communities. Evidence indicates the effectiveness of a shift away from open defecation free as a key outcome measure, towards a more integrated model that includes a focus on the role of the State and the private sector to develop and finance safely managed services. As programming evolves from technical engineering work towards more institutional support to Governments and the broader enabling environment for WASH, UNICEF is looking to invest in relevant staff capacities, knowledge systems and partnerships. This is a lesson with implications beyond the current midterm review and will also inform the development of the next Strategic Plan.

46. Research has found that a limited focus on equity in the predominant community-based management model for water supply tends to miss the slippage back to the practice of open defecation, which most often occurs among the poorest and most vulnerable populations. UNICEF is working to ensure that programming to promote equitable WASH service delivery, especially in the drinking water supply, adopts a holistic approach. This will be underpinned by a systematic analysis of the locations, interests and needs of vulnerable groups, including, but not limited to, women. With regard to gender equity, UNICEF has learned that it is critical for WASH

programming to move beyond a focus on equal participation or coverage to address the gender-related norms that underlie inequities in this area.

47. The UNICEF WASH sector has increasingly found the separation between development and humanitarian work to be artificial and unhelpful at the operational level. The same basic principles apply in both, as seen in contexts of generalized insecurity and displacement. These include the need to clearly define the operation and maintenance of any existing and new systems, and to include full technical, performance and usage data. Disease outbreaks in humanitarian contexts can provide windows of opportunity to kick-start community-led sanitation programming, accelerate progress and generate lessons for ongoing development programmes. Recurrent climate-driven humanitarian crises are motivating a longer-term focus on building national capacity to address needs. This and related lessons from other sectors that have identified the need for a continued push to better map the humanitarian-development space and navigate its challenges have been taken on board during the midterm review.

## **E. Every child has an equitable chance in life**

48. UNICEF support and advocacy are critical to ensure that child poverty is at the centre of national poverty measurement and reduction strategies. This is not a new lesson for UNICEF nor for its key partners. But achieving accurate child poverty measurement and effective targeting of strategies depends on more inclusive, expanded and innovative sampling and survey strategies, so that children in refugee and migrant populations, institutions, urban slums and unregistered settlements are not excluded. The UNICEF multiple indicator cluster surveys include several measures at the individual level that can serve as the basis for expanded inclusive sampling and surveys. In the short term, UNICEF has learned that qualitative methods can be used to identify groups of children missing from household surveys and social services and to pinpoint the factors underlying their exclusion.

49. UNICEF experience shows that social protection approaches have the potential to increase programme relevance, cut across sector silos and strengthen systems to achieve more sustainable outcomes and results for children. There is clear evidence of the effectiveness of cash transfers on increasing school attendance for children from poor households, although their impact on school completion rates or the transition to secondary school has not been conclusively shown. Evidence shows that the “cash plus” approach, whereby complementary activities or referrals are provided alongside cash transfers, can strengthen sustainable outcomes for children in areas including nutrition and health.

50. While the UNICEF Strategic Plan reflects children’s rights to be heard and to take part in decisions that affect their lives, many UNICEF-supported interventions seek adolescent participation only nominally, through consultation. The organization has learned that greater efforts to create space for meaningful participation in assessments of social protection, and to strengthen adolescents’ voices and contributions to decision-making, can help to ensure that solutions are grounded in their expressed situations and needs. Building on this and based on the findings of the midterm review, UNICEF is working to develop better qualitative and quantitative indicators of adolescent participation and empowerment, to measure progress and to assess the effectiveness of youth participation at all levels of its programming.

51. The 2019 evaluation of the Gender Action Plans has presented a comprehensive and deep account of the lessons learned from the UNICEF work on gender in recent years; this paper therefore highlights only those lessons that are most salient and complementary to the strategic nature of the midterm review exercise. UNICEF has been shifting to a transformational approach to gender equity, with a focus on the

structural and cultural determinants of gender inequality. Initiatives to integrate gender socialization and norms change, to analyse drivers such as intergenerational transfers of gender inequality, and to explore the role of men and boys and masculinities in transforming gender norms, are strengthening this approach. UNICEF is looking to build more evidence of effective context-relevant strategies and approaches to improve outcomes and opportunities for adolescent girls, including the relative merits of systemic, as opposed to targeted, interventions and approaches to address the multidimensional drivers of gender inequalities. UNICEF has prioritized a more systematic application of a gender lens across its programming, to monitor progress towards gender results and capture the longer-term results of interventions on gender dynamics and norms.

52. Accountability for gender results can be strengthened by further embedding gender in institutional oversight mechanisms, such as evaluation and audit, and can be incentivized through institutional reporting and performance structures. Strengthening gender in staff capacity assessments and competency frameworks builds staff ownership of gender action plans and strategies. By developing stronger guidance, UNICEF can also incentivize and monitor partners' gender equality work. Gender specialists play a critical role in strengthening gender in programming and policy, especially when they have the support and scope to focus on mainstreaming as well as programming. However, experience has shown that mainstreaming a gender-transformative approach is an organization-wide responsibility, and should be advanced through capacity-strengthening activities for all staff.

53. UNICEF has learned that programmes that include disability as a criterion of vulnerability often lack strategies to address it in their planning, reporting or data collection. Based on this, UNICEF is working at the regional level to build knowledge of and evidence on the barriers to inclusion for children with disabilities as well as other vulnerable groups. At the country level, complementing attention to reaching the most vulnerable with equity-focused policy advocacy helps to ensure that government programmes better address issues of equity. UNICEF is taking this forward to strengthen its future programming.

#### **IV. Lessons learned from UNICEF humanitarian action**

54. Human rights standards and frameworks are the basis of coherent, universal and principled humanitarian action that protects the lives, health and dignity of individual human beings at all stages, and underlie efforts to address the direct and indirect causes and consequences of crises. Institutional commitment to a rights-based approach in emergencies, as laid out in the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, has proven useful, complemented by efforts to increase knowledge and capacity for systematic application of the approach on the ground.

55. The report on the midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 and annual report for 2019 of the Executive Director of UNICEF and the annual report on UNICEF humanitarian action (for 2019) have already provided extensive analysis of the organization's work and performance in this area, including in terms of organizational learning based on recent evaluations and the ongoing humanitarian review. This paper provides a brief selection of some of the most pertinent lessons that have emerged, particularly in relation to the analysis of performance against the Strategic Plan targets and the broader strategic findings and recommendations of the midterm review.

56. In humanitarian contexts, UNICEF struggles to find the right balance between coverage – reaching the greatest number of people in need, with equity, versus reaching the people in greatest need, who may be harder and costlier to reach. It has tended to focus first on coverage, with no systematic approach to identify the

dynamics that influence access, to prioritize according to vulnerability, nor to maximize the relevance and reach of interventions to those in greatest need. Real-time data can enable more efficient targeting, as shown by an evaluation of the UNICEF response to the Level 2 crisis in Cameroon, which used data from the U-Report platform combined with third-party field monitoring. Through its Evaluation Office, UNICEF is exploring additional ways to use U-Report to support data collection as part of broader efforts to receive direct feedback from affected population groups at the country level.

57. UNICEF humanitarian action has also been found to be lacking in specific strategies or approaches for gender equality, with country-level staff not sufficiently aware of the gender action plans, and guidelines not sufficiently contextualized to apply good practices and lessons learned across sectors. In practice, staff tend to focus on equal participation, rather than addressing structural changes through attention to gender-related norms and social determinants of inequality.

58. In humanitarian situations, accountability is a cornerstone of principled access and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, and is central to the dynamics of a rights-based approach. In fragile settings, accountability and complaint mechanisms also play an important role in strengthening State legitimacy and contribute to peacebuilding. UNICEF is aware that its humanitarian action can be enhanced by consolidating a structured approach to accountability to affected populations, moving towards a systematic way of gauging community satisfaction with the relevance, coverage and quality of its programmes. UNICEF is developing an organization-wide conceptual framework for accountability to affected populations and supporting its country offices to strengthen accountability. While there is room to improve the uptake and understanding of collective approaches to accountability across UNICEF, measures are being taken to promote coordination efforts across humanitarian and United Nations country teams, as well as with Governments and other organizations. Better evidence of the added value of integrating accountability to affected populations into humanitarian programming can support work with implementing partners to build a shared understanding of the importance of accountability, their responsibilities in its fulfilment and effective implementation mechanisms.

59. Systematic accountability to the populations reached and served in humanitarian action requires formal complaint mechanisms, systematic measures to reflect feedback in programming, indicators to assess the uptake of feedback and complaints, and – crucially – programme flexibility to respond to them. Inter-agency complaint and feedback mechanisms, including the “One UN” reporting systems at the country level, are effective in promoting shared United Nations accountability and providing a platform to ensure that system-wide action is centred in children’s rights.

60. As noted earlier in this paper, generalized insecurity and displacement may render the separation between development and humanitarian programming artificial and counterproductive. In countries facing vast and protracted humanitarian crises, UNICEF faces the challenge of delivering results for children in the short term, while comprehensively working on strengthening systems and community resilience for equitable development over the longer term. Working across the humanitarian-development nexus requires flexibility in systems, skills, programming and leadership to address changing needs, while also building systems and capacities for longer-term responses. UNICEF has issued strategic guidelines across the organization to address the conceptual divide between humanitarian action and development work. These will need to be better understood and applied, with stronger investments made to develop the appropriate skills, both within UNICEF and externally.

61. UNICEF has increasingly adopted a focus on resilience, which staff in the field consider an opportunity to explore durable solutions to humanitarian crises, linking life-saving interventions with actions to stimulate early recovery and long-term growth for affected communities. UNICEF has learned the criticality of a more clearly defined, actionable and measurable resilience agenda, which should be implemented in close collaboration with the relevant clusters and other United Nations agencies. Effective approaches also embed concepts of preparedness and resilience into the programme planning cycle, and increase the upstream focus to build preparation and risk management into sector planning and national government capacity.

62. Multisectoral, multi-year, flexible and timely funding is key to enabling humanitarian responses to strengthen prevention, preparedness, resilience and work that spans the development-humanitarian nexus. UNICEF, along with other actors, is in a position to strengthen the awareness and capacity of local partners and authorities to apply quality standards, and to conduct more evidence-based advocacy with donors to provide adequate, timely and flexible funding. The success in fundraising for the integrated rapid response mechanism modality shows the effectiveness of demonstrating results in terms of lives saved, children protected and families reunited, and of mobilizing resources for individual sectors as components of a broader, integrated child survival package. UNICEF has developed more experience in using real-time evaluation methods, including through its response to Cyclone Idai, which allow more timely generation of evidence and more meaningful participation of stakeholders. However, a limited capacity to produce and share real-time data was found to hinder communication with donors about the current situation, needs and priorities, as well as the development of evidence-based approaches.

## V. Looking forward: 2020–2021

63. As UNICEF considers the lessons learned that are outlined in this paper, all of which have framed the wider midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021, the world is facing an unprecedented global health and economic crisis ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts of the crisis are disrupting, and are expected to continue disrupting, livelihoods and the services that children depend on for their health, safety, development and well-being, with the most vulnerable children at greatest risk. UNICEF is committed to taking urgent action, together with Governments and partners, to prevent a child rights crisis that threatens to reverse development gains. The lessons presented in this paper and reflected in the midterm review demonstrate the organization's experience, readiness and willingness to play a full part in meeting this global challenge. UNICEF remains an agency defined by action, but it is a culture of action founded on decades of learning and experience.

64. The COVID-19 pandemic has struck at a time when progress towards the achievement of many of the child-related Sustainable Development Goals is already off track, and adds urgency to applying several of the lessons identified in this paper – on addressing inequities; strengthening systems; and integrating programming across the humanitarian-development nexus, across sectors, partnerships and the United Nations development system. UNICEF is already addressing these lessons through promising strategies and approaches in programming and operations, which have been highlighted through the midterm review process. The organization will accelerate efforts to build on the lessons through the development of its new Strategic Plan, 2022–2025.

65. In this context, efforts by UNICEF to sharpen and deepen its focus on equity and gender equality are particularly salient. In areas such as HIV and education, UNICEF is prioritizing investment in disaggregated data to focus on the populations at greatest risk, to identify the social, economic and environmental determinants of

exclusion from schools and services, and to inform differentiated programming approaches. UNICEF still has to approach the task of further systematizing its efforts to leave no child behind by embedding an ever-stronger operational approach to equity across the organization, so that programming can find a better balance between coverage and reaching the most vulnerable. UNICEF will also ensure that the rights-based approach is understood and applied more consistently, internally and among its partners.

66. The cross-cutting area of gender is one in which the midterm review, building on other important review exercises, such as the evaluation of the Gender Action Plans, has recognized the need to increase, strengthen and systematize learning, research and knowledge, with measures to expand staff training on gender equality and to enhance data and evidence across sectors. UNICEF has also recognized the need to improve documentation of lessons learned in gender, in particular to increase their sectoral relevance to those designing programmes in the field. UNICEF is expanding programming on positive gender norms and gender socialization. Meanwhile, the need for a deeper reckoning with gender norms – how they change and what happens as they do – has been identified in several areas, including child protection, which is adjusting its theory of change to emphasize the importance of gender-transformative strategies.

67. Climate change and environmental sustainability have been emerging areas of work for UNICEF over recent years, with the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 the first ever to include related indicators. Through heightened attention to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on children, UNICEF has come to recognize climate change as a major headwind that can slow down, or even reverse, progress for children by increasing vulnerabilities affecting all areas of children's rights and exacerbating fragility – with disproportionate impacts on the poorest and most disadvantaged children.

68. The midterm review has elevated action on climate change and environmental degradation as an organizational priority, to be mainstreamed throughout all UNICEF programmes across sectors, along with evidence-based advocacy for solutions and continued measures to improve the environmental sustainability of operations. Over the coming two years, these efforts will aim to provide a basis for UNICEF to make climate and the environment a key consideration across all result areas of the next Strategic Plan, and for the organization to be recognized as a major development actor in a climate and environment response that places child rights at the centre. The ability of UNICEF to act on the lessons it has already learned on climate action, combined with those the organization is expected to learn in the coming years, will shape our world for years to come, and may well define future generations' views of UNICEF as a leading policymaker and programmer.

69. The midterm review highlighted that reaching children in humanitarian and fragile contexts – starting with improving data to gain greater insight into their situation – is indispensable to advancing global progress towards achievement of the Strategic Plan objectives and the Sustainable Development Goal targets. In 2019, UNICEF issued a procedure to enhance linkages between humanitarian and development programmes, emphasizing child-sensitive and multi-hazard risk analysis to inform programming across all areas of work.

70. Children are increasingly using digital tools that utilize artificial intelligence systems. When used ethically, these systems hold significant potential for children's development; when they are not, they raise concerns around privacy, accountability, recourse and exclusion. UNICEF has found that at present national strategies and ethical artificial intelligence guidelines dedicate little attention to children's rights. To address this issue, UNICEF has been developing policy guidance for Governments

and businesses, in consultation with experts and children around the world, for the creation of artificial intelligence systems that protect, provide for and empower children.

71. The need for concerted international action in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the importance of operationalizing United Nations reform, including through joint programming that combines the comparative strengths of United Nations sister agencies and uses resources efficiently to achieve results. A number of key partnerships with these sister agencies will drive UNICEF work in priority areas. With the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF is working to ensure that refugee children and those in host communities have access to essential services. Meanwhile, joint UNICEF-World Food Programme nutrition initiatives are emphasizing multisectoral programming to better reach children and achieve impacts on multiple areas of their lives. These lessons on scaling up partnerships with its sister agencies around achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and child rights will be a continuing feature of the work of UNICEF in the coming years.

72. Lastly, UNICEF recognizes that robust data and evidence are the foundation for understanding trends in the situation of children; they form the starting point for evidence-based programming and are a powerful tool for advocacy and resource mobilization. The midterm review reaffirmed efforts to strengthen UNICEF research, including by strengthening governance mechanisms, research infrastructure and funding, and by strengthening monitoring as a strategic, decentralized function that encourages good decision-making based on robust evidence. With real-time monitoring to supply the right data to the right people at the right time in order to inform decisions on the ground, UNICEF will strengthen the line of sight from the Sustainable Development Goals to Strategic Plan targets to country programme results and focus, while continuing to respect the criticality of national ownership of development processes.

73. Like so much of the world during these difficult days, UNICEF has learned that, in this era of the Sustainable Development Goals, one cannot speak about the local and the global in separate terms. Likewise, learning global lessons is dependent on learning local lessons. Development gains in one place can benefit other countries and regions, but setbacks and crises such as the current pandemic can quickly spread around the world and threaten hard-won results for children everywhere. Strengthening the capacity to monitor local change in real time, and systematically linking it with the collectively cherished global goals, is the key to making strategic planning fit for purpose for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At this moment of global crisis, it is a lesson worth highlighting most, above all others.

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