



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
7 January 2026

Original: English

For decision

United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

First regular session 2026

10–13 February 2026

Item 9 of the provisional agenda*

Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education, 2018–2023

Summary**

Summary

Supporting and promoting early childhood development (ECD), including early childhood education (ECE), is one of the core mandates of UNICEF. The present evaluation was designed to support organizational learning and accountability of UNICEF investments in ECD and ECE between 2018 and 2023. The evaluation found a significant UNICEF contribution to multisectoral ECD national policies and plans, systems strengthening for front-line workforce development and parental/caregiver engagement. This indicates that the organization made an effective case for investing in ECD as a strong catalyst for realizing national and global development goals. Notably, even during the coronavirus disease UNICEF successfully scaled and reached parents and caregivers through its ECD and ECE programming efforts from 2018 to 2023, reaching more than 220 million children, including about 150 million in emergencies.

There are some areas of concern as well – insufficient financial investment for ECD overall and the ECE subsector, and a lack of consistent data on child development outcomes and parent/caregiver practices. Organizational approaches for integration of sectoral work in ECD require greater clarification within the UNICEF ECD theory of change and measurement frameworks.

The evaluation recommendations aim to strengthen UNICEF policies and guidance to ensure that they are ECD-sensitive by explicitly identifying the unique needs of young children of different ages and marginalized groups, strengthening advocacy for public financing for ECD and the ECE subsector, and providing guidance on internal and external coherence of the integrated ECD approach.

Elements of a draft decision are provided in section VI.

* [E/ICEF/2026/1](#).

** The evaluation report summary is being circulated in all official languages. The full report is available in English from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website (see annex I).

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



I. Introduction

A. Background

1. The early childhood development (ECD) and early childhood education (ECE) work of UNICEF is grounded in evidence regarding the needs of young children aged 0–8 years, especially marginalized populations in resource-poor countries and humanitarian contexts.

2. Many children are growing up in homes without learning resources and the necessary learning support. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey data from 45 countries reveal that only 2.2 children’s books per household are available. Data from 2024 show that, globally, about 400 million children under 5 (6 in 10 children) are regularly subjected to violent discipline by their caregivers.¹ Of these, about 330 million are punished by physical means.

3. UNICEF work in ECD has evolved considerably, particularly since 2018, when it became an explicit organizational priority. Key changes included shifting from sector-based to multisectoral programming and moving from service delivery to focusing on the enabling environment and systems strengthening. The strategy incorporated neuroscience research concepts such as toxic stress and responsive caregiving.

4. The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 established a renewed vision, articulated further in the UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development 2030 and the new UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029. This vision frames ECD programming to explicitly recognize the catalytic role of parents/caregivers, emphasizes the first 1,000 days of life, and seeks to achieve a new global target: ensuring that at least 275 million children benefit every year, and by 2030, from policies and programmes supporting ECD. The organization now employs a “whole-of-UNICEF” effort, i.e., the integrated ECD approach, uniting sectoral work in health, education, child protection, water and sanitation, and social policy to achieve Sustainable Development Goal targets for young children.

5. Recent UNICEF work on ECD has prioritized improving stimulation and nurturing care at home, with resources for gender-responsive parenting support, ensuring caregiver mental health in national policies and plans, and promoting family-friendly policies.² The organization has also advocated for addressing the unique needs of young children and their parents/caregivers in emergencies.

6. During the evaluation period, UNICEF work in pre-primary education and early learning, including in humanitarian emergencies, underwent a strategic shift for the organization. Key changes to the UNICEF education approach, as outlined in the current education strategy, include advocating for increased national spending on pre-primary education, advocating for at least one year of pre-primary education in every country, and increasing the national spending on pre-primary education and system-strengthening work to ensure that ECE is systematically integrated into the national cycles of education sector planning and policy implementation.³

¹ UNICEF, ‘Violent discipline at home is widespread, even among the very youngest children’, UNICEF, June 2025, available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/violent-discipline/>, accessed on 28 October 2025.

² UNICEF, ‘Caring for the Caregiver’, UNICEF, 2024, available at <https://www.unicef.org/documents/caring-caregiver>, accessed on 28 October 2025.

³ UNICEF, ‘India: Every Child Learns – UNICEF Education Strategy 2019–2030’, UNICEF, May 2020, available at <https://www.unicef.org/documents/india-every-child-learns-education-strategy-2019-2030>, accessed on 28 October 2025.

7. Public and private partnerships are key in achieving results for children and, as such, UNICEF has engaged a variety of stakeholders in its work on ECD and ECE through strategic partnerships and collaborations on global, regional, national, subnational and community levels. Governments are the main partners of UNICEF, because they hold primary responsibility for the protection, promotion and fulfilment of children's rights in any country. Other partners include United Nations agencies, multilateral development banks, bilateral donors, civil society, non-governmental organizations, academia, the media and the private sector.

B. Purpose, objectives and scope

8. The evaluation focused on UNICEF contributions to national ECD/ECE policies, systems and programme interventions. Its purpose was twofold: to enhance organizational learning and to strengthen organizational accountability. On the learning front, it investigated the extent to which UNICEF had leveraged organizational investments in the integrated ECD approach and utilized its knowledge, resources and experiences to support countries in strengthening their national ECD programmes. For accountability purposes, the evaluation also examined UNICEF achievement of results aimed at increasing access to ECE and care opportunities. Evaluative evidence was designed to facilitate decision-making, advocacy and resource mobilization, and to contribute to global learning within the ECD and ECE subsectors.

9. This evaluation examined three objectives – (i) enabling environment for the integrated ECD approach: assess UNICEF work in support of national policy reform, financing strategies, and budgeting for strengthening ECD and the ECE subsector to expand access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0–8 years in countries with different typologies; (ii) system strengthening for implementing the integrated ECD approach: examine the adequacy and sustainability of the UNICEF-integrated ECD approach and available capacities to support the adaption, acceleration and expansion of efforts for providing early stimulation and learning support and services for children aged 0–8 years in countries with different typologies; and (iii) programme results from the integrated ECD approach: assess the efficacy of UNICEF support for the development of high-quality integrated ECD programmes that promote holistic ECD and school readiness among caregivers and children aged 0–8 years in countries with different typologies.

10. The evaluation thematic scope was to examine the relationship between the multisectoral, integrated ECD approach and school readiness across UNICEF programmes for young children (see figure I). It aimed to understand how UNICEF-supported interventions that were focused on integrated ECD programming contributed to the three pillars of school readiness for children aged 0–8 years: (1) ready children; (2) ready schools; and (3) ready families. The evaluation examined these relationships, as well as programme frameworks that reflected the integrated ECD approach, such as child-friendly communities and child-friendly schools.

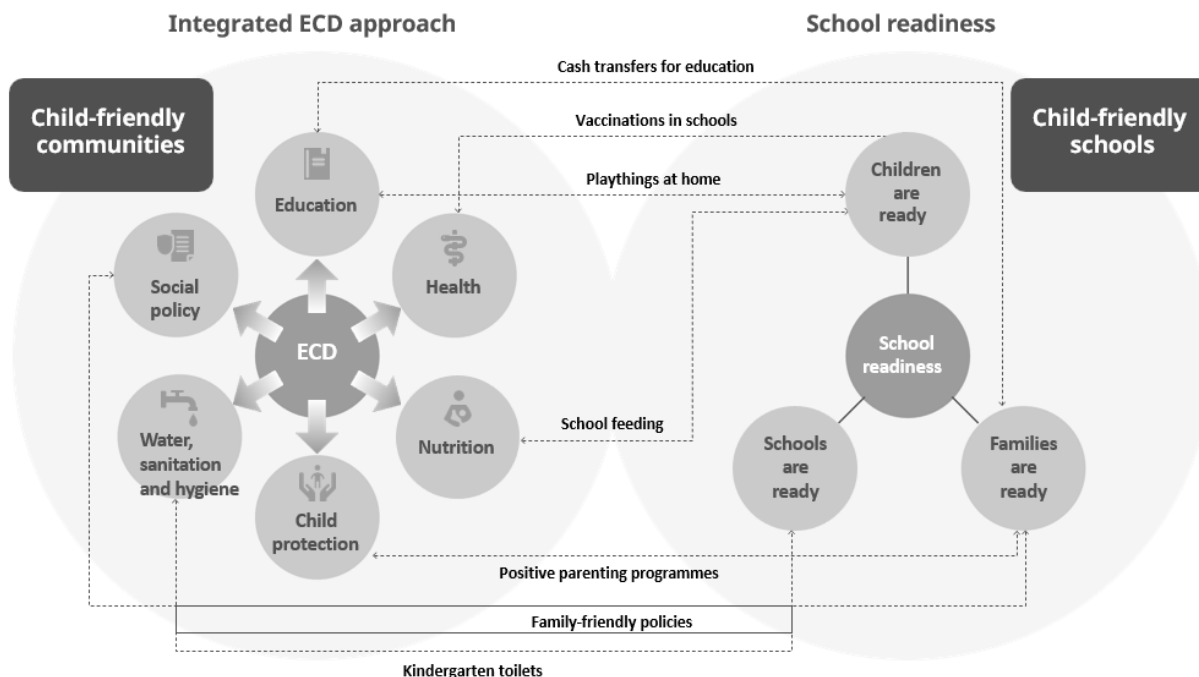
11. The evaluation covered all five Goal Areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, with a particular emphasis on education, health and child protection, as these are the most common ministerial leaders or anchors for integrated ECD services. It utilized a dual-generation approach, focusing on children aged 0–8 years, while also emphasizing the support and engagement of their parents and caregivers.

12. The temporal scope of the evaluation was the period 2018–2023, to examine key developments in the ECD and ECE subsector across the two strategic planning periods (2018–2021 and 2022–2025). The geographic scope and influence are intended to be global. Countries selected for the evaluation were those that identified ECD and ECE as a priority in their country programme documents, and where UNICEF-supported

ECD and ECE programmes were directly relevant to the thematic scope of the evaluation.

Figure I

Evaluation scope



II. Methodology

A. Evaluation method and data

13. The evaluation employed a non-experimental theory-based design, and mixed-methods were used to gather and analyse qualitative and quantitative data, by maintaining both UNICEF and United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards and integrating gender equity and disability inclusion. A theory of change (see annex II) was developed and used as an evaluation tool to interrogate and/or verify whether the necessary inputs were made, outputs realized, and the extent to which the intended outcomes were achieved.

14. The evaluation employed three core questions and 14 subquestions, which were structured around five prioritized evaluation criteria from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. These criteria were selected for their alignment with the evaluation's purpose and objectives, and included: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.

15. A variety of strategic documents were reviewed, including national policies and country programme documents, annual reports, guidance and research papers. A sample of 15 countries was purposively selected for an in-depth desk review to ensure representation across regions, and development and fragile contexts, of which six countries (Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Lesotho, Namibia, Pakistan and Serbia) were deep dives for which separate country reports were produced focusing on their ECD and ECE priorities.

16. The primary data collection employed various qualitative methods and approaches. A total of 868 participants were engaged in the evaluation on global,

regional and country levels, including 184 UNICEF staff members, 121 government partners, 77 implementing partners, 265 front-line workers and 221 parents/caregivers. Gender equity and disability inclusion were embedded in sampling, instruments and analysis through disaggregation and disability-sensitive tools.

17. The evaluation team used a coding matrix to organize both primary and secondary data, ensuring a comprehensive triangulation of findings to address the evaluation questions and test the assumptions in the theory of change. To ensure the quality and completeness of data collected and used, validation workshops were conducted in all 15 in-depth desk review countries.

B. Limitations and mitigation measures

18. The evaluation faced several limitations primarily related to data availability and the evaluability of certain aspects of the ECD and ECE portfolios. The main challenge was the lack of sufficient data to analyse UNICEF contributions and pathways to results for children. This was compounded by two main issues: inconsistent key performance indicators across two Strategic Plan periods, making it impossible to gather consistent data across the evaluation period and to draw clear conclusions about UNICEF contributions over time. Further, many recent ECD and ECE key performance indicators in the UNICEF Strategic Plans (period 2018 to 2023) lacked data. National surveys on children's development, health and learning were conducted at different times in different countries, which complicated the ability to ascertain causal connections. The reliance on country self-reports within internal monitoring systems introduces potential issues with data reliability and bias. To mitigate this, the evaluation team thoroughly examined all available data, clearly specifying where theory of change pathways were supported by strong evidence versus where links were hypothesized and required further data for validation.

19. The selection of countries for the desk review and deep-dive data collection, while systematic, required adjustments due to ongoing or other planned evaluations, which led to limited regional coverage. To promote transparency, the full report includes information on data quality and strength within its indicator scales to inform judgments for each core evaluation question.

III. Findings

20. The findings of the evaluation should be interpreted with consideration of the organizational and international development context during the evaluation period, 2018–2023. UNICEF and national Governments faced unprecedented challenges during the global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the effects of which are evident in the evaluation findings.

A. Enabling environment for an integrated ECD approach

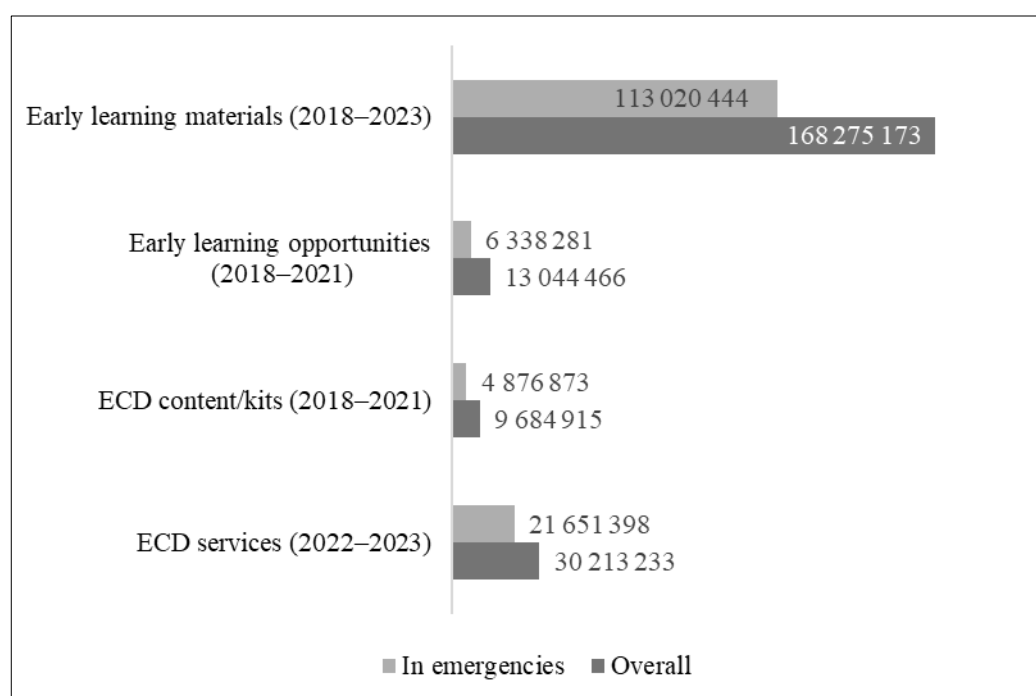
21. UNICEF commitment to reaching the poorest and most marginalized children aged 0–8 years was evident through its programming efforts for ECD and ECE. Between 2018 and 2023, UNICEF reached 221.2 million children with ECD and ECE programming, including 148.9 million children (66 per cent) in emergencies (see figure II). UNICEF commitment was scaled during the COVID-19 pandemic to reach additional children to sustain its work for ECD and ECE. Among the national ECD policies and plans reviewed, UNICEF-supported policies and practices were found to be sufficiently aligned with national goals and objectives, as well as with the Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development. UNICEF had a significant role in ensuring the relevance and alignment of national ECD policies and plans, given its global comparative advantage and leadership in this field of practice.

Marginalized groups and children of different developmental age groups could be better identified and integrated into national ECD policies and plans to ensure that the most vulnerable are visible in decision-making processes and that their unique needs are fully addressed.

22. The evaluation found emerging policy coherence among the sectors responsible for ECD and ECE. The multisectoral or integrated ECD approach was a critical component in national ECD policies and plans, and to a lesser extent in ECE policies that are sector-oriented. Education was the main sector with policies covering children aged 3–8 years, while health was the main sector covering policies for children aged 0–2 years. However, some national policies were not ECD-sensitive at all, such as national development plans, national child protection and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) plans, and national social protection policies. In these cases, national policies or plans applied to all children aged 0–18 years, without specific mention for the unique needs of young children or the period of ECD.

Figure II

Number of children reached through UNICEF-supported ECD-ECE programmes, 2018–2023



Data source: UNICEF results reporting platform.

23. **A combination of UNICEF strategies and inputs was effective in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years.** Partnerships, advocacy, communications and social behaviour change, and community engagement were key cross-cutting strategies for ECD. The selection of strategies and inputs depended on access to human and financial resources, the organization's comparative advantage, sector objectives, country context, and the situation of children. The organization's contribution to the enabling environment and system strengthening was effective in policy development and reforms for ECD and ECE, which facilitated increased access to these services. The countries with multisectoral ECD policies increased from 47 in 2018 to 83 in 2021, and the number of countries with ECD plans increased from 42 to 66 during the same period. UNICEF effectively contributed to the design and implementation of sectoral and multisectoral plans and integrated packages for ECD. However, the organization was less successful

in assessing how its work in ECD contributed to strengthening the quality of these services, or in building family resilience and adaptiveness to shocks.

24. UNICEF has made substantial strides in building the capacity of relevant ministries and local governments to increase budget allocations for ECD and the ECE subsector through public financing, and through public-private partnerships in some cases. For example, Namibia increased its education budget for pre-primary education from 1.5 per cent in 2016 to 3.4 per cent in 2019; in Serbia, local governments leveraged \$2 million to promote ECD interventions; in Timor-Leste, the President declared preschool education as key priority and increased the budget for preschool education by more than 200 per cent in 2023 compared with the allocation in 2022. However, overall, the organization was less successful in influencing public financing for ECD. UNICEF strategies for public financing have not translated into increased investments on a large scale. There were limited data available on public financing for ECD, especially disaggregated data for the contributions from all relevant sectors through an interoperable financial data management system. National policies for ECD typically did not mandate financing for these services, although the costs were sometimes included in national action plans.

B. System strengthening for an integrated ECD approach

25. Evaluation findings show that greater conceptual clarity on terms such as “school readiness”,⁴ “early learning”⁵ and the “integrated ECD approach”⁶ is required to ensure external coherence. The shared understanding of the determinants of school readiness and learning in the early years was inconsistent. The terms “school readiness” and “early learning” were often used interchangeably but defined in different ways by UNICEF, government, front-line workers and parents/caregivers. The Build to Last framework suggests that school readiness and early learning are the focus of the education sector for children aged 3–6 years. By contrast, the Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development suggests early childhood development as an outcome of responsive caregiving for children aged 0–2 years, and by extension, the responsibility of all sectors. UNICEF and government partners agreed that ECD services should be holistic and integrated. However, the lack of clarity on integration approaches at the national and decentralized levels, and the lack of evidence on the efficacy of this approach, may be stalling progress on its uptake in practice.

26. UNICEF contributed to increased access to a continuum of services for children and parents by engaging all sectors, but gaps remain in coverage for different age groups and among the most marginalized groups. Children aged 3–5 years had access to the most comprehensive set of ECD programmes and services. The emphasis for children aged 0–2 years was on developmental monitoring services and early learning opportunities. However, these services were not sufficiently scaled due a lack of

⁴ Refers to the desired outcomes of a strong pre-primary subsector, including children’s physical well-being, social and emotional competence, and cognitive and communication abilities, as well as children’s overall curiosity and motivation to learn, often referred to as school readiness skills.

⁵ Opportunities for early learning refer to any opportunity for the infant or child to interact with a person, place or object in their environment. The term recognizes that every interaction (positive or negative, or absence of an interaction) is contributing to the child’s brain development and laying the foundation for later learning.

⁶ An approach that seeks to build cross-sectoral coordination systems to deliver a combination of services from different sectors through one channel, which can be independent of service sectors or delivered via one sector but are provided to the same child. A set of ECD services delivered via integrated or coordinated mechanisms, addressing the full range of needed services for the child across different ECD phases (prenatal, 0–6 months, 6 months–3 years and 3–6 years) as well as different sectors (health, nutrition, child development and education, and protection).

public financing, and there were notable gaps in services for this cohort. UNICEF has been effective in expanding early learning opportunities for young children, with evidence of increased access across different countries. Access to parenting programmes for children aged 0–6 years reached 1.5 million parents/caregivers across 106 countries from 2022 to 2023. The continuum of ECD services supported by UNICEF demonstrates the importance of children aged 3 years in transitioning from services dominated by home-based or centre-based care in the health sector to formal settings for organized early learning and development in the education sector.

27. Globally, there were insufficient data available at the population level to determine the percentage of children who were developmentally on track and received support for learning, early stimulation and responsive caregiving from their parents/caregivers. The available documentary evidence suggests an overall positive and important contribution by UNICEF in meeting the needs of children and parents/caregivers, but with disparities across regions, emergency status and economic status. While UNICEF has been effective in establishing a foundation for ECD programmes and services through partnerships and capacity-building efforts, the evidence demonstrated issues of equity in realizing the organization-wide outcome of ECD in certain regions and in fragile contexts. The lack of comprehensive and recent data on children's developmental status limits what can be said about UNICEF contributions and impact. The success of UNICEF contributions varied based on country capacity and infrastructure, indicating that while needs are being met in some regions, gaps in access, quality and sustainability persist, particularly for marginalized populations.

28. UNICEF work in ECD evolved in definition and positioning within the organization during the evaluation period, which has caused some internal confusion regarding how to plan, mobilize resources for, implement and monitor the integrated ECD approach. While the UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development 2030 was an important step forward in clarifying ECD as a shared vision and organizational outcome, internal leadership and governance processes are still catching up with how to best implement this vision. The term “integrated ECD approach” was not well defined in UNICEF documents, and staff had different definitions for the term. The lack of internal coherence for ECD has contributed to coordination, measurement and resource allocation challenges that are limiting the ability of UNICEF to demonstrate and communicate the efficacy of its work. The evaluation identified six integration approaches being implemented by UNICEF to promote integrated ECD programming (see annex III).

29. UNICEF is moderately well positioned and somewhat efficient in advancing ECD policies and reforms through long-term partnerships and a focus on evidence-based policymaking. However, global investments in ECD by UNICEF do not match its comparative advantage. UNICEF is highly regarded by government partners for its flexibility in project management and its advocacy for children's rights, as well as its role in data collection and analysis, which informs global and national policy frameworks. UNICEF efforts to improve the enabling environment and strengthen systems for ECD have increased the likelihood of sustainability. Key measures for sustaining the work in ECD were associated with UNICEF strategies, inputs and outputs, such as evidence generation and the adoption of multisectoral ECD policies and plans. However, concerns were raised about insufficient investment in critical areas of ECD and ECE. The evidence indicates that less than 10 per cent of UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 Goal Area funds were allocated by UNICEF Headquarters-Programme Division, regional offices and country offices for both ECD and ECE. This means that UNICEF has not met its organizational benchmark of 10 per cent

allocations for ECE within Goal Area 2.⁷ The global trend of less than 10 per cent allocations by UNICEF for ECD and ECE programming underscores the need for more sustained and targeted investment to address these challenges and meet global development goals.

C. Programme results from an integrated ECD approach

30. The evaluation found evidence of UNICEF contribution to effective data collection and utilization for programme planning and improvement. However, significant gaps in ECD outcome- and impact-level data prohibit UNICEF and Governments from tracking progress of children's developmental status, parent/caregiver practices and front-line worker capacities. Some countries have made significant strides in establishing robust systems for tracking and reporting on key ECD indicators, while other countries have struggled due to limited infrastructure and inconsistent data collection practices. UNICEF support was instrumental in improving data systems in some countries but has not sufficiently gathered evidence on improvements in parent/caregiver knowledge, attitudes and practices for ECD or on front-line worker knowledge, skills and capacities. Resource mobilization and sustained efforts are needed to ensure data comprehensiveness and disaggregation to influence policies, support evidence-based decision-making, and achieve equitable outcomes for all children.

31. On a global level, the major contribution of UNICEF at this stage of programme maturity was in strengthening the enabling environment and systems for ECD. The evidence trail falls off when tracing the contribution of UNICEF on outcomes for caregivers/parents and front-line workers and on child impacts. The theory of change for UNICEF work on ECD was retroactively developed through this evaluation through an evidence-based contribution analysis of all data sources. The evaluation helped to clarify what these outcomes and impacts could be for each sector, as well as the collective outcomes and impact of the integrated ECD approach.

32. UNICEF has effectively implemented strategies to reach young children excluded from formal early learning opportunities through multisectoral health, education and social policy interventions. UNICEF strategies have helped to reach four child populations that have been excluded from formal early learning programmes and/or preschool, including: (i) children aged 0–2 years; (ii) children with disabilities; (iii) marginalized and vulnerable child groups; and (iv) children raised by adolescent mothers. Despite the challenges in reaching these groups, UNICEF has implemented several relevant strategies that have shown promise in reaching excluded populations. These interventions have included: (i) nurseries/preschools with early learning activities and parenting support programmes for children aged 0–2 years; (ii) home-based early childhood interventions and inclusive education for children with disabilities; (iii) cash transfer programmes for poorer children and children in emergencies, and (iv) alternative education pathways and parenting support programmes for adolescent mothers.

33. There is solid evidence of UNICEF contributions to effective data collection and utilization for programme planning and improvement. However, significant gaps in ECD/ECE outcome- and impact-level data limit UNICEF and Governments from tracking progress of children's developmental status, parent/caregiver practices and front-line worker capacities. Out of 21 ECD/ECE key performance indicators, only

⁷ Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education, 16 November 2022, available at <https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/11/tashkent-declaration-ecce-2022.pdf>.

12 had sufficient data to measure the progress. Of these 12 indicators with data to measure progress, only 5 have achieved their target.

IV. Conclusions

34. UNICEF continued to sharpen and evolve its work in ECD and ECE during the evaluation period, but the overall stage of programme maturity for the integrated ECD approach was emerging in practice. Further, organizational investment in ECD and ECE programming has not kept pace with the demand generated through UNICEF global leadership and strong comparative advantage for the integrated ECD approach. Despite these contextual challenges and limited resources, UNICEF excelled in identifying opportunities to leverage partnerships and affect change for young children and their parents/caregivers, especially among the most vulnerable groups.

35. UNICEF strategies and inputs for the enabling environment and system strengthening were very effective in scaling the number of national ECD and ECE policies, as well as multisectoral and sector plans, which contributed to increased access to a continuum of ECD services. Overall, the level and quality of evidence advanced in demonstrating UNICEF contributions and success in strengthening the enabling environment for ECD and ECE across countries with different typologies. These policies and plans were relevant and coherent with UNICEF goals and objectives for ECD and ECE. However, the policies and plans lacked specificity on the unique needs of children of different ages and developmental stages (0–2 years, 3–5 years and 6–8 years).

36. Public financing for ECD and ECE continued to be a significant challenge despite UNICEF advocacy and substantial progress in building government capacity to allocate budget for these services. Only a handful of countries managed to make meaningful progress in increasing public investment for ECD and ECE.

37. UNICEF has excelled in supporting Governments to provide a continuum of services for children aged 0-8 years, which is a key result of the integrated ECD approach. Evaluative evidence shows UNICEF contributions to strengthening the systems required for scaling access to early stimulation and learning support services, and in sustaining efforts for the integrated ECD approach in countries with different typologies. The organization was also very successful in engaging parents and caregivers through its programming efforts in ECD, even during the pandemic.

38. There was limited evidence to assess the efficacy of UNICEF support in promoting ECD and school readiness. Data availability on key indicators related to front-line worker skills, parenting practices and the child impacts for the integrated ECD approach was insufficient. A lack of government resources and/or capacity limited frequent data collection, coverage and disaggregation on children's developmental status, early stimulation and responsive care, and participation rates in pre-primary.

39. UNICEF strategies for reaching child groups excluded from formal early stimulation and learning opportunities were effective for children with disabilities and children from poorer families through a multisectoral (or integrated) approach. Despite these successes, there were persistent challenges in ensuring access to holistic ECD services among marginalized children, namely children with disabilities, children living in rural areas, and children in emergency contexts.

V. Recommendations

40. Based on findings and conclusions, the evaluation made four recommendations that were developed and validated in close collaboration with key stakeholders, as follows:

41. **Recommendation 1: Strengthen UNICEF advocacy and communications and global guidance on the unique needs of young children of different ages across the early childhood period of development, and for the most marginalized child groups.** National policies and plans for ECD require additional clarification to ensure that the needs of young children are visible and planned for, especially marginalized child groups, including children with disabilities and children in emergencies. The needs of young children across developmental stages are insufficiently clear and planned for by Governments and other decision makers. National development plans for child protection, WASH and social policy were not sufficiently ECD-sensitive, for example, by including the concept of toxic stress in child protection policies.

42. *Subrecommendation 1.1:* Update the UNICEF programme guidance for ECD⁸ and methodological notes to include sector-specific guidance for young children, as well as guidance on the integrated services required to ensure transition between each developmental stage, especially at year 3 and year 6.

43. *Subrecommendation 1.2:* Strengthen advocacy with Governments to explicitly identify and plan for the needs of the most marginalized child groups within national policies and plans (especially for children with disabilities, children in emergencies, and during the first 1,000 days).

44. **Recommendation 2: Strengthen and scale UNICEF global advocacy and communications on public financing for ECD.** Public financing for ECD is insufficient for the implementation of national policies and plans or for scaling integrated services to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. UNICEF has had limited success in increasing budget allocation for ECD at scale, but promising tools and examples already exist to propel government and private sector investment.

45. *Subrecommendation 2.1:* Sustain and scale the dissemination of effective advocacy messages regarding the return on investment through ECD utilizing existing UNICEF advocacy resources (such as the Early Moments Matter campaign, UNICEF global resource guide on public finance for children in ECD, ECD investment cases, and ECE Accelerator Toolkit).

46. *Subrecommendation 2.2:* Facilitate regional exchanges between countries where successful examples of ECD investment emerge to compel government investment.

47. *Subrecommendation 2.3:* Strengthen the UNICEF programme guidance for ECD and methodological notes on how to leverage partnerships with local governments, business and the private sector to ensure that innovative financing models are implemented and sustainable.

48. *Subrecommendation 2.4:* Continue to prioritize contextualizing the ECE Accelerator Toolkit, ensuring that it offers targeted guidance for countries facing distinct challenges. This includes expediting the refinement of the Toolkit to support the integration of inclusive practices into national and subnational education plans, fostering diverse and sustainable financing strategies, and promoting cross-country learning by leveraging UNICEF structures of regional offices and country offices to share best practices and solutions to common challenges.

⁸ See <https://www.unicef.org/documents/unicef-programme-guidance-early-childhood-development>.

49. Recommendation 3: Strengthen the UNICEF programme guidance for ECD and methodological notes on the range of integration approaches for ECD in countries at different stages of programme development and with varying degrees of resources.

The external coherence of the integrated ECD approach was limited, requiring greater clarity on its options, conditions and benefits. Key terms such as the “integrated ECD approach”, “early learning” and “school readiness” must be precisely defined to ensure a shared understanding among stakeholders. The integrated ECD approach promotes a continuum of holistic services for young children and their parents/caregivers. However, UNICEF-supported programmes did not sufficiently cover children aged 0–2 years, particularly in terms of early learning opportunities.

50. *Subrecommendation 3.1:* Update the UNICEF programme guidance for ECD and methodological notes by clarifying key terms and concepts to ensure that UNICEF and government partners have a common understanding of early learning for children aged 0–2 years, the determinants of school readiness, and the efficacy of the integrated ECD approach.

51. *Subrecommendation 3.2:* Update the UNICEF programme guidance for ECD and methodological notes to include the typology of integration approaches identified through this evaluation. Conduct additional global research on the integration approaches to expand on the examples from the desk review country profiles and inform global guidance.

52. *Subrecommendation 3.3:* Ensure that the UNICEF programme guidance for ECD and methodological notes support UNICEF programme managers in building government awareness and capacity in the selection of entry points for scaling holistic services within and across sectors through a variety of integration approaches that promote a continuum of ECD services for children aged 0–8 years.

53. Recommendation 4: Update the UNICEF programme guidance for ECD and methodological notes for the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029 to clarify internal governance structures and processes, resource allocation requirements and a shared measurement framework for the integrated ECD approach.

Lack of clarity on the outcomes and impacts of the integrated ECD approach limits the ability of UNICEF to communicate the efficacy of this approach and to assess UNICEF contributions. The UNICEF theory of change does not currently reflect the integrated ECD approach, which was retroactively developed through this evaluation. Key performance indicators were insufficient for examining the collective outcomes and impacts of the integrated ECD approach, and UNICEF organizational investment in the integrated ECD approach and in the ECE subsector has not kept pace with the demand generated through UNICEF global leadership and strong comparative advantage for ECD. The new vision for ECD as an organizational outcome has caused some internal confusion on the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of the Goal Area teams. Limited technical resources were available at the regional level to facilitate implementation of the integrated ECD approach.

54. *Subrecommendation 4.1:* Clarify internal roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of sector-specific activities for the early years, as well as for cross-cutting activities in the early years as they relate to the integrated ECD approach.

55. *Subrecommendation 4.2:* Clarify the theory of change and measurement framework in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029 on the integrated ECD approach so that there are clearly identified indicators for sector-specific and collective outcomes and impacts for the early years. Consider responsive caregiving and the ECD index as shared results.

56. *Subrecommendation 4.3:* As the global steward for Sustainable Development Goal 4.2.1,⁹ substantially scale the implementation of the ECD module from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, as well as other studies on front-line worker capacities and parent/caregiver practices to ensure sufficient data to measure progress and impact on key ECD measures.

57. *Subrecommendation 4.4:* Clarify internal global budgeting procedures so that UNICEF investment in the early years (aged 0–8 years) is clear and trackable for all Goal Areas (or Impact Results), such as through the use of tags that denote all investments for ECD.

58. *Subrecommendation 4.5:* Build an organizational budget for the early years from each Goal Area (or Impact Result) and for the integrated ECD approach.

VI. Draft decision

The Executive Board

Takes note of the Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education, 2018–2023, its summary ([E/ICEF/2026/3](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2026/4](#)).

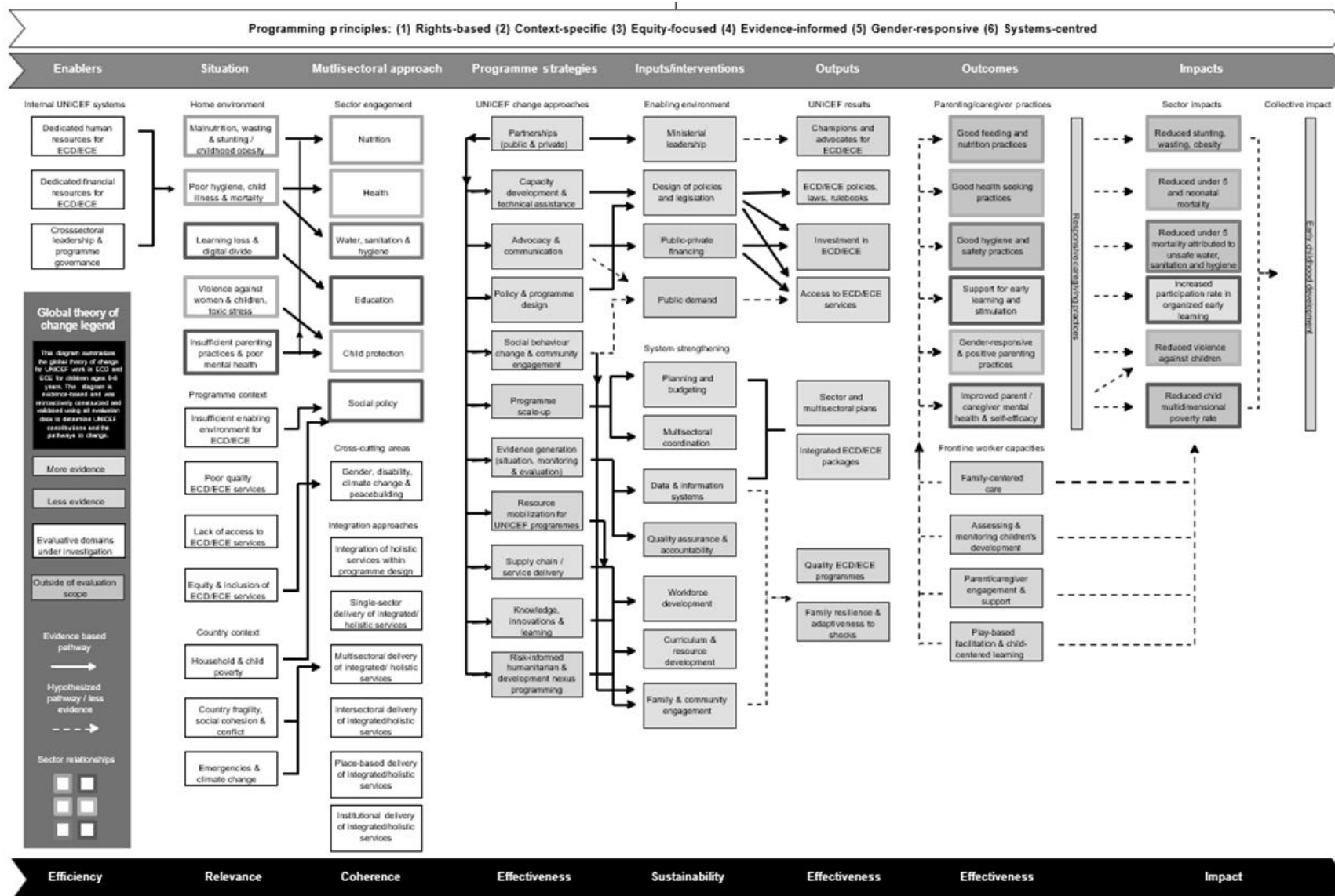
⁹ Proportion of children aged 24–59 months who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being.

Annex I

The full report is available on the UNICEF Evaluation Office website:
<https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/reports#/detail/19996/evaluation-of-unicef-work-in-early-childhood-development-eed-and-early-childhood-education-ece>.

Annex II

Global ECD-ECE evaluation theory of change for children aged 0–8 years, 2018–2023



Annex III

UNICEF-supported approaches to integrated ECD programming

Integration approach	Definition	Implementation conditions and benefits
Integrated programme design	Policies, legislation, rulebooks, frameworks, strategies, plans, programmes, curricula, training resources and services are designed to be holistic and comprehensive of all relevant sectors responsible for ECD services	• Requires limited resources to implement and leverages UNICEF technical capacities and comparative advantage in ECD • Is often a good starting point for integration because it involves bringing stakeholders together to raise awareness about the need for an integrated approach and engages them in the design of integrated policies, plans and programmes • Can be easily integrated into existing systems, by enhancing the design of policies, plans and programmes to be more inclusive of all nurturing care components
Single-sector delivery of holistic services	One sector is the anchor or leader in coordinating the delivery of holistic ECD services	• Requires strong ministerial leadership and institutional capacity to coordinate the actions of multiple actors • Streamlines communication for front-line workers and beneficiaries • Often encounters challenges in implementation if the lead ministry does not have a mandate or the power to hold other actors accountable • Works well in countries where a particular sector has the mandate, more resources and offers a high potential for scaling
Multisectoral delivery of holistic services	More than one sector is leading in the delivery of holistic ECD services, which may or may not be coordinated efforts	• Requires clear understanding of sector mandates and interventions for children of different ages, genders and abilities • Works better with a coordination mechanism to promote continuous communication and collaboration, which often requires additional human and financial resources • Works better in countries with national ECD policies and strategies
Intersectoral delivery of holistic services	More organized efforts to align approaches between sectors in the delivery of holistic ECD services	• Requires a shared vision, clear coordination and communication mechanisms and a shared measurement framework, which often requires additional human and financial resources • Requires a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of different

Integration approach	Definition	Implementation conditions and benefits
		sectors, as well as accountability mechanisms • Works better in countries with advanced national and subnational ECD systems
Place-based delivery of holistic services	Holistic ECD services are delivered through programme convergence in specific geographic locations	• Requires decentralized leadership and institutional capacity to coordinate, implement and monitor the services. • Coordinates services in specific places, such as through home-based care, and through integrated frameworks such as child-friendly communities and child-friendly cities/municipalities • Works well for targeting services to reach the most vulnerable communities, and for emergency response in isolated and affected regions
Institutional delivery of holistic services	Holistic ECD services are delivered through institutions	• Requires front-line worker capacity to coordinate, implement and monitor the services, which often requires additional human and financial resources • Coordinates services within institutions, such as healthcare centres, ECD centres, preschools, nurseries, childcare centres, social welfare centres, and developmental counselling units • Works better in countries with advanced ECD policies and systems, and with public financing for these services