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Update on organizational culture and diversity

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Executive Board decision 2025/12. The report provides an update on ongoing efforts by UNICEF to strengthen its organizational culture, with a vision of fostering a workplace where all colleagues are treated with dignity and respect, and where that culture also ensures that staff are held accountable – fairly and respectfully – for delivering results for children.

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

* E/ICEF/2026/9.



I. Overview

1. This report provides an update on ongoing efforts by UNICEF to strengthen its organizational culture and further integrate its core values into the delivery of results, with the vision of creating a workplace where all colleagues are treated with dignity and respect, and a culture that also ensures that staff are held accountable – fairly and respectfully – for delivering results for children. The report focuses on the multiple initiatives and challenges since the previous report submitted to the Executive Board on this topic at the annual session of 2025 ([E/ICEF/2025/17](#)), including the repercussions of the funding crisis experienced over that period.
2. Work by UNICEF on organizational culture and diversity continued to follow the normative framework established by the Charter of the United Nations and international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The work is also guided by the United Nations System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity (2017), the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (2019) and the UNICEF Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy, 2022–2030.
3. Discrimination in any form – whether carried out by individuals or inadvertently embedded in systems, policies and practices – weakens the trust, cohesion and performance that the organization depends on to deliver results for children. UNICEF therefore addresses organizational culture and diversity as interconnected challenges, building empathy and solidarity across groups while remaining anchored in the principles of non-discrimination and equal opportunity enshrined in the Charter.
4. Since an Update on UNICEF efforts to address racism and racial discrimination ([E/ICEF/2026/6](#)) was presented to the Executive Board at the first regular session of 2026, the present report will not provide an update on that topic.

II. Policy, frameworks, tools and guidance

5. In 2025, UNICEF reinforced its organizational culture through the adoption of new and updated policies that elevated expectations of integrity, accountability, respectful conduct and staff well-being across the organization. The updated Policy on Safeguarding strengthened a survivor-centred, prevention-oriented approach to preventing harm, clarifying prohibited behaviours and expected practices for all personnel, partners and visitors, and embedding safeguarding across programmatic, operational and administrative processes. The new Policy on Anti-Fraud and Corruption reinforced a zero-tolerance approach to inaction on fraud and corruption, clarified roles and responsibilities, and strengthened due diligence requirements and internal controls to promote ethical conduct and organizational trust. Complementing these, the Policy on the Delegation of Authority clarified decision-making responsibilities, strengthened managerial accountability, and emphasized transparency, segregation of duties and responsible stewardship of UNICEF resources. The new Policy on Establishing, Changing or Closing UNICEF Offices introduced transparent, risk-informed decision-making processes for office configuration and staff assignment, reinforcing fairness, clarity and accountability during structural shifts. To enhance integrity and transparency in partnerships, UNICEF also issued the Policy on Disclosure of Integrity-Related Information to Public Sector Resource Partners, creating consistent disclosure standards that protect victims, whistle-blowers and investigative integrity; the Procedure on Imposition of Sanctions and Remedial Measures on Implementing Partners, which strengthened the organization's ability to respond to misconduct by partners through a structured, impartial review process; and the Procedure on Environmental and Social Standards in Programming, which institutionalized accountability for responsible, risk-aware

and community-centred programme design and implementation across all offices, upholding sustainability as a core value.

6. In 2025, UNICEF experienced a significant stress test of its organizational culture due to funding reductions, leading to organizational restructuring under the Future Focus Initiative. These changes have led to heightened concerns related to mistrust, anxiety and psychological safety, with social-listening insights indicating rising fear and discontent that risk undermining trust, collaboration, accountability, inclusion and innovation. UNICEF responded to the funding crisis through a series of measures designed to streamline operations, reduce costs and care for staff wherever possible, while sustaining the delivery of results for children in the long term. The organization implemented a 25 per cent budget reduction across headquarters divisions and regional offices, and a 10 per cent reduction for country offices in order to preserve delivery of critical programmes at national level. This was accompanied by structural reforms such as the consolidation of divisions, the creation of Centres of Excellence and the relocation of up to 70 per cent of headquarters posts to lower-cost duty stations to achieve long-term savings. To manage the large number of abolished posts, UNICEF introduced a Global Ring-fenced Recruitment Exercise, ensuring that all newly created and funded positions were first made available to staff on abolished posts, supported by a centralized, transparent governance and selection process. Additionally, UNICEF issued a Staff Support Strategy that provided standardized entitlements, career transition support, mental health services and several exceptional support measures, including a six-month notice period for fixed-term staff whose posts were abolished and a Voluntary Separation Scheme designed to expand the pool of ring-fenced vacancies by encouraging one-time voluntary separations where appropriate. An enhanced collaboration and regular convening of employee resource groups, including joint meetings with the Global Staff Association and senior leadership, allowed for broader input and feedback on the restructuring process from colleagues across UNICEF. Much of this feedback was incorporated into decisions, plans and town hall meetings linked to the implementation of restructuring and right-sizing initiatives, including in working groups discussing key changes implemented at global level. Together, these policy actions allowed UNICEF to navigate the financial contraction while safeguarding fairness, organizational stability and staff well-being.

7. UNICEF will launch a framework – the Organizational Culture Pathway for the Future Focus Initiative – to proactively navigate these changes. The framework is designed to ensure that organizational restructuring, repositioning and right-sizing efforts do not compromise core UNICEF values or create a culture where results are pursued “at any cost”. The Organizational Culture Pathway provides guidance, tools and approaches to sustain the cultural journey taken by UNICEF within the Future Focus Initiative context towards a workplace where all colleagues are treated with dignity and respect, and where that culture also ensures that staff are held accountable for delivering results while navigating difficult times. In addition, a robust series of measurement tools accompany the Organizational Culture Pathway, including social and community listening; updated post-Future Focus Initiative Global Staff Survey Action Plans; and culture labs, quantitative feedback mechanisms and town hall meeting polls. Together, these mechanisms support evidence-informed decision-making and help to ensure that the organizational culture at UNICEF remains resilient, inclusive and aligned with the needs of both staff and the children the organization serves.

8. Monitoring of fair and balanced workforce composition was prioritized to ensure that no employee group was disproportionately affected by organizational restructuring, repositioning and right-sizing efforts. In subsequent Future Focus Initiative-related recruitment exercises, UNICEF prioritized internal candidates in

line with the United Nations Staff Regulations and Rules, ensured balanced representation on recruitment panels, and enhanced the oversight of recruitment processes to reinforce fairness, transparency and objectivity, in alignment with the UNICEF core values.

9. While the challenges faced by the UNICEF workforce were significant, this did not translate into lenience in accountability for results. Throughout 2025, UNICEF continued to strengthen its staff performance management and development mechanisms. In particular, the new multi-rater feedback approach introduced in 2024 – an anonymous 360-degree mechanism enabling input from supervisees, peers and team members – was further refined and made mandatory for all staff with supervisory responsibilities.

10. Guided by the United Nations System Mental Health and Well-being Strategy and the forthcoming UNICEF Staff Well-being Strategy, UNICEF is strengthening its prevention-oriented, culture-focused approach to mental health through the launch of the UNICEF Mental Health Stigma Reduction Framework. The Framework establishes a unified, organization-wide approach to reducing mental health stigma by embedding stigma-reduction principles into policies, systems, leadership practices and organizational culture; strengthening mental health literacy and respectful communication; and fostering an environment that normalizes help-seeking and supports voluntary disclosure without fear of career impact. Ultimately, the Framework aims to cultivate a workplace where mental health is treated with dignity, colleagues experience psychological safety, and seeking support is recognized as an act of strength and professionalism. It also seeks to embed mental health as a routine and open part of workplace dialogue, reducing stigma and ensuring that discussions about well-being are consistently met with understanding, respect and appropriate support.

III. Capacity-building and behaviour change

11. UNICEF organized over 100 dedicated learning sessions for 90 offices on various topics related to organizational culture and non-discrimination, reaching over 9,700 participants. This demonstrates the impact on office cultures vis-à-vis 2024 (of 90 dedicated sessions reaching 2,400 participants), given a challenging year of funding restrictions and restructuring. The sessions were reinforced with the creation and launch of practical resources and activities to help to foster dialogue at the individual and team levels. These were part of a menu of learning resources that also included an individual-based e-module titled “Becoming an Inclusion Champion”, to equip learners with the tools needed to reinforce belonging. The e-module is available to all United Nations colleagues via the UNICEF online learning platform (Agora). In addition, during Ethics Month in October 2025, Ethics and Culture Champions conducted over 70 discussions in at least 63 offices focusing on the month’s theme, “Living our Values in Challenging Times”. Topics covered mental health, morale, inspiration, resilience, appreciation and recognition.

12. UNICEF continued to implement the Managing People with Purpose programme, which is intended to reach about 6,100 people managers in the organization and to help them to build knowledge, skills, peer support, coaching, emotional intelligence and self-awareness to be more effective in their supervisory roles. As of March 2026, 83 per cent of all UNICEF managers had started the training programme and 32 per cent had completed the entire programme, which is an increase of 21 per cent from March 2025.

13. UNICEF continues to encourage informal resolution, including mediation, to resolve interpersonal conflicts among colleagues, and refers its personnel to the services provided by the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and

Programmes (i.e. United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children’s Fund, United Nations Office for Project Services and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). In 2025, the Office received a total of 829 cases (708 ombuds and 121 mediation cases), including 268 cases from UNICEF (225 ombuds and 43 mediation cases) – a 25 per cent increase compared with 2024. The settlement rate for all mediation cases was 85 per cent. The satisfaction rate for the mediation services provided by the Office and funded by UNICEF was 4.5 on a 5-point scale, with 96 per cent of survey participants confirming they would recommend mediation to a colleague. In 2025, the Office of the Ombudsman also conducted outreach and awareness programmes reaching more than 11,300 personnel across the five organizations it serves.

14. In 2025, the UNICEF Staff Wellbeing team reported a strong overlap between mental health trends and organizational culture pressures. Staff across duty stations experienced heightened distress driven not only by workload and humanitarian exposure but by systemic cultural conditions: reduced psychological safety, fear of speaking openly, intensified competition and a perceived disconnect between the stated values of UNICEF and lived experience. Mental health strain was closely tied to cultural dynamics such as ambiguity, rapid change without sense-making and value-based distress, especially for colleagues on abolished posts who reported loss of professional identity and feelings of disposability. Managers and people and culture staff carried significant emotional labour, tasked with supporting teams while managing their own uncertainty, reflecting a cultural climate where responsibility outweighed structural support. At the same time, the UNICEF Staff Wellbeing team reported that culture could buffer mental health risks when leadership adopted compassionate communication, acknowledged uncertainty and created reflective, collective spaces; such behaviours strengthened belonging, reduced isolation and rebuilt psychological safety, demonstrating that mental health outcomes were shaped more by organizational culture and leadership practices than by individual resilience alone.

IV. Evidence-based and data-driven approach

15. An evidence-based and data-driven approach is key in improving organizational culture and accountability for delivering results for children. UNICEF continues to enhance the collection and reporting of metrics related to its workforce composition and performance and its employees’ experience. In alignment with United Nations system frameworks, key demographics are monitored in the workforce composition, namely, gender, geographical diversity, disability and age. The data presented below are valid as at 31 December 2025, unless otherwise specified.

16. Throughout 2025, the last year of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, the organization experienced shifts in the workforce, given the global funding constraints, reorganization and reduction of posts under the Future Focus Initiative. Following Programme Budget Review decisions in 2025 and continuing through February 2026, the number of fixed-term staff positions decreased from 17,260 to 14,892, a reduction of 14 per cent, reflecting both the scale of the financial contraction and the implementation of Future Focus Initiative-related restructuring and right-sizing measures. At the end of 2025, International Professionals (IPs) accounted for 29.9 per cent of all staff, while National Officers (NOs) represented 36.5 per cent and General Service (GS) staff comprised 33.6 per cent.

Gender parity

17. In line with the United Nations System-wide Strategy on Gender Parity,¹ UNICEF reached and maintained global parity across categories of staff members. Across UNICEF, 50.1 per cent of posts were held by women, confirming continued gender parity across the workforce. Women accounted for 52.9 per cent of IPs, 49.6 per cent of NOs and 48.0 per cent of GS staff. Within senior leadership, 49.6 per cent of posts were held by women, maintaining parity at the highest levels. The Leadership Talent Group (the main talent pipeline of candidates for the most senior posts in UNICEF) had 60 per cent women in 2025 (4 percentage points higher than in 2024), which is a strong talent pipeline to attain and maintain 50:50 gender parity within senior staff. Members of the Leadership Talent Group are selected based on their qualifications and experience and undergo a comprehensive process to gauge their readiness for senior roles, after which they are offered support to prepare them for future assignments.

18. At the junior professional level, women comprise 64.4 per cent of P-2 posts and 66.7 per cent of P-1 posts, which constitutes an important talent pipeline for the mid- and higher-level IP post category. Among NOs, there is parity among women and men at most levels. Similarly, women hold 57.2 per cent of posts at the NO-A level, an important talent pipeline. Similar to previous years, among GS staff, women hold more posts at G-5 and G-6 levels in programme management and administration functions, whereas men hold more posts at G-1, G-2 and G-3 levels, mainly in transportation.

Geographical diversity

19. Aligned with the Charter of the United Nations, UNICEF strives to recruit qualified staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible. A total of 177 nationalities were represented in the workforce in 2025. In terms of the representation of United Nations regional groups of Member States within the IP cadre, 37.7 per cent are from Western European and other States, 30.4 per cent of staff are nationals of African States, 21.2 per cent are from Asia-Pacific States, 6.3 per cent are from Latin American and Caribbean States, and 4.4 per cent are from Eastern European States. These percentages are similar to those of other United Nations organizations.

Disability inclusion

20. The United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy² has been incorporated into the work of the organization through the UNICEF Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy,³ where a commitment was made to strengthen talent outreach to qualified candidates and improve the accessibility of digital and physical workspaces so that persons with disabilities could be employed by the organization, free of any barriers and discrimination. UNICEF intends to gradually enhance its talent outreach to the most qualified persons with disabilities as well as to improve retention through provision of reasonable accommodation in the workplace to increase global representation by at least 7 per cent by 2030.

¹ United Nations, *System-Wide Strategy on Gender Parity*, United Nations, 6 October 2017, https://www.un.org/gender/sites/www.un.org.gender/files/gender_parity_strategy_october_2017.pdf.

² United Nations, *Disability Inclusion Strategy*, United Nations, New York, <https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/>.

³ United Nations Children's Fund, *UNICEF Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) 2022–2030*, UNICEF, December 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/unicef-disability-inclusion-policy-and-strategy-dipas-2022-2030>.

21. In 2025, UNICEF made significant strides in strengthening its disability-inclusive organizational culture by advancing both the reasonable accommodation system and managerial capability in neurodivergence inclusion. Implementation of the Management response to the 2024 evaluation of UNICEF's Reasonable Accommodation Fund accelerated markedly, with a completion rate of 84 per cent by year-end, resulting in a more accessible and accountable digital request platform, and enhanced transparency throughout the full process. Despite organization-wide staffing reductions linked to the funding crisis, reasonable accommodation fund utilization increased by 20 per cent between 1 January to 31 December 2025 when compared to the same period in 2024, reflecting greater awareness, streamlined process and stronger trust among employees with disabilities, supervisors and people and culture focal points. Complementing these system-level improvements, UNICEF launched the Nurturing Neurodivergent Talent in an Inclusive Workplace resource suite, including a multilingual manager's guide, an inclusive premises and recruitment checklist, global webinars and monthly drop-in sessions, collectively equipping managers and people and culture professionals with practical tools to foster neuroinclusive leadership and organizational culture. More than 4,600 participants engaged across internal and inter-agency events, signalling strong demand and positioning UNICEF as a reference in neuroinclusion within the United Nations system as well as for prospective candidates.⁴ Together, these achievements advanced organizational capability, reduced stigma and strengthened the ability of UNICEF to nurture and support employees with disabilities, reinforcing its commitment to fostering a more enabling workplace.

Age

22. The average age of staff members increased to 46.4 years in 2025, from 45.6 years in 2024. In the senior staff levels, the average age is 55 years, 9 years older than the organizational average. Persons under the age of 35 years comprised 8.8 per cent of all staff at the end of 2025. This represents a decline of 2.5 percentage points compared to 2024, requiring further reflection on how to ensure a balanced representation of younger professionals, reflecting a pipeline for succession planning.

Employee experience

23. In addition to monitoring the UNICEF workforce composition, measuring how different groups experience the workplace is pivotal to ensure that dignity, fairness and competence prevail in recruitment processes and in the performance of duties. In 2025, UNICEF made the considered decision to defer its organization-wide employee survey, recognizing that the exceptional circumstances of that year – marked by significant funding constraints, downsizing and workforce adjustments under the Future Focus Initiative – would have materially affected the reliability and utility of results. Survey findings gathered during a period of acute uncertainty and ongoing organizational change risk reflecting the immediate context rather than the underlying culture, limiting their value as a basis for meaningful action. UNICEF remains fully committed to this important listening mechanism and launched the Pulse Check survey on workplace culture in March 2026, when the workforce was expected to stabilize. The Pulse Check survey will close in mid-April, and the results will be released in June 2026.

24. In February 2026, an independent evaluation of human resources management in UNICEF was concluded. Organizational culture was incorporated in the scope of

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF Nurturing Neurodivergent Talent in an Inclusive Workplace, <https://www.unicef.org/careers/unicef-nurturing-neurodivergent-talent-inclusive-workplace>.

the evaluation, investigating the effectiveness and alignment of related initiatives, in particular the alignment between culture, values and ethical principles, management and leadership, as well as the effectiveness of UNICEF culture initiatives. Cultural challenges were identified, including hierarchical behaviour, risk aversion, conflict avoidance and core values that may be inconsistently lived. The recommendations linked to organizational culture include strengthening platforms for open dialogue on persistent challenges, reinforcing accountability for living values, addressing gaps between declared and lived culture, and actively promoting the core values of care and respect.

25. UNICEF continues to collect qualitative data about the experience of colleagues leaving the organization, including on matters of workplace culture. An analysis of data from exit forms submitted by some 2,599 colleagues who left UNICEF between January 2022 and December 2024 (37 per cent of those who left during this period) indicates that, of these departures, about 48 per cent left due to contract expiry, about 29 per cent resigned and 10 per cent retired. Continuously over the years, the majority of colleagues (94 per cent) who leave say they would consider working with UNICEF again and that they would recommend UNICEF as an employer of choice. Moreover, job satisfaction was high among the colleagues who had left, with 89 per cent indicating that their roles had been interesting and impactful. Gender parity was observed on an aggregate level and across contract types among the staff separating from UNICEF across the years (2022–2024) except for the NO category, where 55 per cent of separating staff were men. The majority of separations were within the mid-career age ranges of 30–40 years (36 per cent) and 41–50 years (30 per cent) and the fewest were in the youngest age range of 18–30 years, at 7 per cent of all separations. This was also the most underrepresented age range, with only 4 per cent of all staff in this age range as of December 2024. The general perception of the workplace culture at UNICEF is positive, with the majority of staff indicating satisfaction across a number of factors – including work-life harmony, fair treatment by supervisors, relationships with supervisors and colleagues – and across different contract types. About 12 per cent of respondents indicated dissatisfaction across these factors. An intersectional analysis highlighted that respondents from certain employee resource groups, such as staff with disabilities, were less satisfied across all measured indicators compared to the overall responses. This is more pronounced on indicators related to relationship with supervisor, fair and equal treatment by supervisor, human resource/administrative support and impact of job on personal life, as well as workplace issues. Additional reasons for leaving included workplace harassment, discrimination based on identity and lack of a sense of belonging. Ongoing efforts on organizational culture are already addressing most of these concerns.

26. In 2025, the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI) registered 26 reports related to sexual harassment. In seven cases received in 2025 or carried over from 2024, OIAI found a factual basis indicating that UNICEF staff or affiliate personnel had engaged in possible misconduct. Six cases implicating staff members were transmitted to the Deputy Executive Director, Management, for possible disciplinary proceedings. Of these six cases, two resulted in findings of misconduct and the imposition of disciplinary sanctions. As of March 2026, four cases remained under review. One case implicating affiliate personnel was transmitted to another United Nations entity for appropriate action. In 2025, OIAI closed two cases as unsubstantiated following investigation, and nine cases on the basis of the alleged victims' lack of consent to proceed with a formal investigation and where the allegations could not be established through other means.

27. UNICEF issues internal reports regarding disciplinary measures taken in response to misconduct cases. These reports summarize the cases while ensuring confidentiality, detail the specific sanctions imposed and discuss aggravating and

mitigating circumstances. This practice enhances transparency, underscores the accountability of perpetrators and serves as a deterrent against such behaviours. UNICEF remains among the few United Nations organizations that issue such reports regularly.

V. Inter-agency collaboration

28. UNICEF remains a key contributor in inter-agency forums, co-leading the subgroup on disability inclusion established under the High-level Committee on Management. UNICEF also shares best practices and technical expertise with its members. UNICEF is also part of the United Nations Workplace Mental Health and Well-being Strategy Board, contributing to discussions and sharing existing resources on the topic. UNICEF continues to engage at the inter-agency level to share lessons learned and good practices, and to brainstorm on approaches that ensure that the UNICEF workforce is representative of the communities it serves while also ensuring the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity, in alignment with the Charter.

29. In 2025, UNICEF continued to play a leading role in advancing system-wide efforts to prevent and address sexual harassment, including through its chairmanship of the United Nations Executive Group to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Harassment. The work helped to foster coherence across entities on safeguarding-related workforce measures, including strengthened approaches to screening, vetting and accountability, and harmonized misconduct prevention practices.

30. Since 2022, ClearCheck has remained a core component of the background verification procedures followed by UNICEF for all staff on fixed-term appointments, and for staff on temporary appointments when they report prior United Nations or UNICEF experience. In line with system-wide requirements, UNICEF began using ClearCheck 2.0 in December 2025 to record all personnel separated for misconduct, thereby strengthening cross-agency transparency and preventing the re-employment of individuals with substantiated misconduct. In 2026, this process will be complemented by the piloting of the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, which facilitates sharing of misconduct data between employers and is currently implemented by over 320 organizations.

31. During 2025, UNICEF soft-launched a new mandatory onboarding module on preventing and addressing sexual harassment, complementing the United Nations system training on harassment, sexual harassment and abuse of authority. The module has received positive feedback, and French and Spanish versions are being finalized to expand global accessibility. Further details on these training initiatives are provided in the Update on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, which is also being presented to the Executive Board at this annual session ([E/ICEF/2026/15](#)).

VI. Draft decision

The Executive Board

Takes note of the Update on organizational culture and diversity ([E/ICEF/2026/16/Rev.1](#)) provided by UNICEF.