Evaluation of the Humanitarian Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Response of UNICEF in Iraq
UNICEF carries out a range of activities in Qayara Airstrip Emergency Site and the Jeddah camps about 70 km south of Mosul. The people in these camps have been displaced from across northern Iraq since military operations began to retake Mosul in October 2016. UNICEF supports WASH activities including the provision of water and sanitation facilities as well as hygiene awareness activities. Additionally, UNICEF runs activities in temporary learning spaces and child friendly spaces to facilitate ongoing education and psychosocial resilience.
Evaluation of the Humanitarian Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Response of UNICEF in Iraq

Overview

Overview of the Humanitarian Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Response of UNICEF in Iraq (2016-2021). In 2016, an estimated 6.6 million people in Iraq were in need of WASH support of which approximately 1.8 million were IDPs, 0.4 million were returnees, and 0.2 million were refugees. In 2021, 1.6 million people were still in need of WASH facilities, with the majority of them, 1.1 million, being returnees, while 0.3 million were IDPs and the rest host community members and refugees. Responding to these WASH needs has formed a significant part of UNICEF’s humanitarian efforts over the last six years. Consequently, the Country Office of UNICEF in Iraq has carried out this evaluation of the humanitarian WASH response of UNICEF in Iraq between 2016 and 2021.

UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH objective is that vulnerable children and their families in the Iraqi context are provided with access to life-saving and sustainable WASH services. To achieve this objective and related outcomes, UNICEF implemented a range of activities which included emergency and large-scale water supply projects, construction/rehabilitation of wastewater treatment facilities, construction of latrines, provision of water trucking and desludging services, hygiene promotion and hygiene kit distribution (including COVID-19 IPC strategies via adapted hygiene messaging and kits), climate change and disaster risk reduction initiatives, as well as innovations such as WASH Service Centers (WSCs), and policy strengthening, capacity building and linkages with government stakeholders for the handover of WASH infrastructure and services.

Evaluation objectives. The objectives of the evaluation have been to: i) assess to what extent UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH response has been effective, efficient and context-appropriate in responding to the local needs of the population; ii) assess to what extent UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH response made effective linkages between the
humanitarian and the development framework; iii) assess the extent to which UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH response has fulfilled accountability commitments and developed the appropriate mechanisms, instruments and human capacities to continuously learn from and adapt its implementation; iv) determine if and how innovations and good practices of UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH response can be replicated or scaled-up; and v) identify the challenges and strengths of the response in complex and protracted emergencies, to generate useful recommendations for Iraq and similar contexts globally.

The primary intended users of this evaluation are managers and staff in UNICEF Iraq and in the Middle East and North Africa Regional Officer (MENARO), UNICEF’s governmental partners in Iraq, donors of UNICEF Iraq’s humanitarian WASH response, members of the WASH cluster/sector coordination groups, implementing partners and other partners of the UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH program in Iraq.

Evaluation Methodology. The evaluation looked at the selected DAC evaluation criteria of efficiency, effectiveness and connectedness in order to evaluate the UNICEF Humanitarian WASH Response. Protection and gender sub-domains were added in order to encourage a thorough analysis of gender, human rights and equity considerations in the final evaluation.

For the data collection, method, quantitative surveys were conducted with direct rightsholder families and their children. Key informant interviews were also conducted with stakeholders in relation to UNICEF WASH programming (2016-2021) including: UNICEF WASH Staff; government and NGO implementing partners; WASH cluster staff (including current and former coordinators); Other relevant clusters/UN agency staff; and community stakeholders (e.g. religious and community leaders). In addition, Focus Group Discussions were carried out within direct and indirect rightsholder communities. Primary data collection methods were also complemented by extensive desk review, observational checklists and field reports, as well as photographic evidence.

Key Findings

Appropriateness

Responsiveness of the intervention. In the early phase, UNICEF was very responsive to the prevailing needs and evolving situation building on the lessons learned from the previous years. The Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) was particularly effective. Conversely, UNICEF’s unilateral decision to withdraw from some camps at short notice and scale down its humanitarian activities was not well communicated or adequately coordinated both within the WASH cluster and with other agencies. Overall, the choice of initial intervention areas by UNICEF allowed for an effective response to emergency needs.

Mainstreaming of standards. Meeting WASH standards has proven challenging, particularly during emergency phases which imposed tradeoffs, but also as a result of the siting, design and equipment of pre-existing camps. Consistently meeting water quality standards has been and remains challenging. Gender mainstreaming is occurring, and attention is paid to the appropriate siting of WASH facilities to guarantee both protection and privacy. Despite commendable initiatives reflecting a concern for addressing the needs of PWD, they do not seem to be part of mainstreamed PWD-sensitive approach. IDPs are comparatively exposed to lower standards of WASH services as a result of the scattering and often more informal settlements.

Connectedness

Level of adoption of needs and risks analyses. UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH response benefited from a broad set of assessment tools providing insights into the evolution of rightsholder needs at different levels. The organization participated in and benefited from the extremely comprehensive WASH needs assessment conducted by the WASH cluster at the onset of the response, followed by regular analyses. UNICEF WASH vulnerability analysis tool was also introduced to help the government assess water-related and climate-change related risks.

Influence of monitoring on decision-making to adjust the response. The UNICEF humanitarian WASH response in Iraq is supported by a broad monitoring system. Whereas the monitoring system in place allows for effective tracking of progress and measurement of performance at activity/output level, it
is much less effective at measuring progress at outcome level, critically reviewing the articulation between outputs and outcomes, and informing strategic changes.

**Gains in resilience resulting from linking humanitarian and development (LHD) frameworks.** UNICEF is well positioned to lead a nexus approach, yet there remains much contrast between the rich theoretical narrative surrounding such approaches and the lack of actionable tools available internally and at cluster level to accompany this process. More broadly, as much of the response focused on addressing emergency WASH needs, gains in resilience are therefore limited for refugees and moderate for host communities. With the closure of camps and as the response has started transitioning towards longer-term objectives, actions are increasingly contributing to build resilience within the system and in return communities.

**Conduciveness of cluster and sector coordination arrangements to achievement of longer-term development objectives.** The presence of strong cluster and inter-cluster coordination added considerable value to the humanitarian WASH response of UNICEF and other actors active in Iraq during the 2016-2021 period. Despite UNICEF’s efforts to build a momentum around a nexus approach in 2018, the WASH cluster did not really help coordinate efforts supporting such an LHD/nexus approach. Ultimately, however, the government decreeing the closure of camps is what catalyzed action, forcing the cluster to promptly resume the conversation around the operationalization of the nexus approach.

**Efficiency**

**Efficiency of the response regarding the mobilization of resources and coordination.** The rapid response mechanism (RRM) and the COVID-19 response led to a very timely and efficient mobilization of financial, material and human resources. This is in contrast with the post-emergency phase, where UNICEF’s WASH response was affected by significant funding constraints, stemming in good part from the decline in donors’ support. UNICEF was unable to maintain the initial high quality of expertise in post-emergency phases, resulting in a lower ability of the WASH section to communicate a vision and structure within its programme.

UNICEF actively contributed to the success of the WASH cluster. Reciprocally, the UNICEF Iraq WASH programme derived efficiency gains from its participation in this coordination platform. Some disconnect amongst the internal coordination structures contributed to suboptimal decision-making and communications, as well as inconsistencies in approaches and discrepancies in the quality of implementation.

**Relative efficiency of adopted service delivery models, innovations, and good practices in the various operating contexts.** UNICEF Iraq introduced many innovations in the WASH sector to help address varied issues such as: water scarcity, energy resilience, health care, solid waste management, and water quality. The WASH Service Centers Model proved successful.

**Efficiency of synergies with other interventions led by UNICEF or other actors, such as government initiatives and responsibilities.** The quality of the synergies with implementing partners largely depended on the type and capacity of each partner (e.g. governmental or local NGO). These capacities were occasionally insufficient. synergies with other UN agencies, such as IOM and UNDP, were rather limited.

**Effectiveness**

**Coverage of WASH humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations, including women and girls.** Overall, the quality and efficiency of the WASH response depended on the capacity, proactiveness and commitment of implementing partners (IPs) / local authorities as well as the availability of UNICEF WASH staff to support the weaker partners. The WSC model not only contributed to more effective stakeholder engagement, decision-making and other conflict resolution processes but also supported the continuity of water supply services. Capacity building activities were generally well-identified, effectively conducted, and benefiting capable and motivated external counterpart technicians. Building upon and sustaining these capacity gains remains highly challenging, however, given institutional weaknesses, including high staff and governance turn-over.

**Accountability towards the affected populations.** Whether in terms of planning (strategy),
implementation (innovative approaches i.e. WSC) or based on the perceptions and satisfaction levels of, in particular host communities and returnees, the findings suggest that there has been effective accountability towards the affected populations (including women and girls).

**Effectiveness of water services.** The exceeding and receding of achievement of water services targets varied across each rightsholders group. Perceptions and satisfaction levels were generally positive across three out of four rightsholder groups, the ‘out-of-camp’ populations being the exception.

**Effectiveness of sanitation services.** Sanitation-related targets are generally far less ambitious than water-related targets. A clear justification for such a significant discrepancy is lacking. Perceptions and satisfaction levels were again generally positive across three out of four rightsholder groups, with the ‘out of camp’ populations being the exception.

**Effectiveness of hygiene services.** Regarding hygiene, the rapid emergency response was very effective in L3 phase and the massive distribution of hygiene kits stands out as a key activity. However, from 2018 onwards, the two related indicators were no longer reported reflecting the evolution of the strategy towards the scaling up of the WASH services and increasing focus on areas of return. In-camp and out of camp rightsholders were more positive than host and returnee groups regarding hygiene activities.

**WASH in schools and health care centers.** The WASH in school response is overall deemed quite effective by the population. In host communities, most respondents consider that these interventions led to more water of a better quality, and improved toilets. The review of the rehabilitation of health centers in liberated areas suggests scope for stronger cooperation between UNICEF and health directorates, and notably in Anbar.

**Conclusions**

**Conclusion 1**
Within a protracted and complex crisis, UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH response has been largely effective, efficient and context-appropriate in responding to the basic emergency WASH needs of the most vulnerable population. One notable gap, however, has been the application of effective WASH services in harder-to-reach areas. Beyond meeting basic emergency needs, the WASH response and its nexus transition had areas that could be improved upon (e.g. most especially in terms of timeliness of initiating nexus approaches), as well as many elements which were well conducted (e.g. late-response coordination with government counterparts to facilitate humanitarian-to-development linkages). Ultimately, despite the evolution from humanitarian to development approaches being somewhat haphazard, the response (at both cluster and programming levels) was able to adapt to provide WASH stability within a volatile and changing context (e.g. including responding to the outcomes of conflict and camp closures on vulnerable populations).

**Conclusion 2**
Despite being slow to initiate practical action, UNICEF has made effective linkages between the humanitarian and the development framework in the latter part of its WASH response from 2019-2021. As noted in conclusion 1 above, there was a certain degree of disconnect between nexus/LHD theory and its practical implementation in the Iraq context for much of the WASH response. Despite UNICEF’s efforts to build a momentum around a nexus approach in 2018, the WASH cluster did not effectively build on efforts to establish an LHD/nexus approach at that time. Ultimately, it was the government in 2019 decreeing the closure of camps which acted as a catalyst for action, forcing UNICEF and the WASH cluster to promptly resume the conversation around the operationalization of the nexus approach.

**Conclusion 3**
UNICEF has somewhat adequately facilitated the implementation of humanitarian standards and good practices in its WASH programming, specifically via the mainstreaming of protection, gender and WASH humanitarian standards for safety and dignity. Complying with standards was a gradual process, which involved tradeoffs (notably at the onset of the response where lifesaving responses took precedent over higher-level technical standards beyond ‘do no harm’), and which was also constrained by challenges such as camp design. As such, application of standards remains an on-going challenge (e.g. in respect of water quality). Moreover, as per conclusion 1, gaps in standards for rightsholders in informal or hard-to-reach
settlements continue as they are the most exposed to sub-standard WASH services as a result of the dispersed nature of their dwellings and the higher humanitarian priority put on denser areas.

Conclusion 4
UNICEF’s humanitarian WASH intervention was timely, efficiently mobilized and well-coordinated in relation to its use of financial, material and human resources for emergency responses. However, for post-emergency phases, the most significant challenge was a relative lack of agility and flexibility with regard to mobilizing and using financial resources, due principally to the drop-off in donor funding from 2018 and an inability to access alternative funding for development.

Conclusion 5
The level of satisfaction with water and sanitation services of affected girl and women populations in camps is generally low compared to female host and returnee populations who report higher satisfaction in this regard. This can be linked in many cases to ill-located and ill-designed camps at many locations which have affected both quality of water and sanitation services. Conversely, the levels of satisfaction with UNICEF’s WASH response in schools support its positive findings in relation to effectiveness across various locations, while rehabilitated health centers had similar satisfaction rates and beneficial outcomes (although the cooperation with health directorates could sometimes be better strengthened).

Conclusion 6
The presence of strong general WASH cluster coordination by UNICEF added considerable value to the humanitarian WASH response and other actors active in Iraq during the 2016-2021 period. The WASH Cluster facilitated an emergency response via rollout of an extremely comprehensive WASH needs assessment conducted at the onset of the crisis which, along with continued monitoring and analyses, benefited actors such as UNICEF in their WASH program implementation. Other WASH Cluster benefits were tangible in the form of an improved level of coordination amongst stakeholders, a greater degree of harmonization of their approaches, and an increased engagement of the government. The cluster also has a convening power highly instrumental to engage government stakeholders which has proven particularly meaningful in the context of a transition towards addressing more long-term objectives.

However, despite generally strong humanitarian coordination, the WASH cluster did not practically coordinate internal efforts supporting such an LHD/nexus approach until the government initiated camp closures. This coordination gap was further exacerbated by staffing gaps and UNICEF’s unilateral decision to withdraw from some WASH and camp response interventions which posed an additional challenge for WASH stakeholders.

Conclusion 7
Comprehensive WASH monitoring systems allowed for effective tracking of progress and measurement of performance at activity/output level. Unsurprisingly, ensuring the same quality of monitoring in the many dispersed informal settlements established following camp closure has proven very challenging. Moreover, monitoring systems were less effectively utilized for measuring progress at outcome level, critically reviewing the articulation between outputs and outcomes, and informing strategic changes. Monitoring was also limited regarding the resilience of various rightholder typologies (e.g. IDPs, returnees). Measuring and understanding of resilience is key to the transition to longer-term objectives where actions increasingly seek to build resilience and self-reliance within communities. Challenges to monitoring represent a gap in UNICEF’s ability to ensure its accountability commitments and to develop the appropriate mechanisms, instruments and human capacities to continuously learn from its implementation and adapt its approaches as necessary (as per objective three of this evaluation).

Conclusion 8
UNICEF-led WASH pilot programmes and innovations yielded many positive results. However, deeper analysis is required to know the level of replication and scale-up potential at outcome level. Most notably, the WASH Service Centers (WSC) initiative was unanimously acknowledged as a successful model and a clear source of efficiency for the organization. Other innovations during the period evaluated included (e.g. groundwater recharge projects, smart-city metering systems, water recycling and the use of reverse osmosis (RO) membrane technology; energy resilience (solar pumping), health care (chlorine production), solid waste management, or water quality (desalination with small scale RO water treatment plants). The lack of conclusive monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) processes for
these innovations prevents deeper understanding of their impact on standard output and outcome level monitoring, as well as to knowing the extent to which such initiatives are most relevant for humanitarian or development contexts (or as a support to linking both).

Conclusion 9
UNICEF has been proactive in developing synergies and partnerships with WASH stakeholders. UNICEF and the government have collaborated closely at all levels on a wide range of activities. However, the quality of the synergies with implementing partners largely depended on the capacity of each partner. This capacity was sometimes deemed insufficient. Synergies with other UN agencies such as IOM and UNDP were also rather limited. Similarly, internally, UNICEF field offices, WASH section and senior management can tend to work in siloes as a result of decentralized structure. This has resulted in sometimes inconsistent communication, approaches and discrepancies in the quality of implementation.

Conclusion 10
In terms of systems of accountability, despite the existence of some feedback mechanisms, there is a need to reinforce the capacity of partners to collect complaints, record them and respond appropriately; and also for UNICEF to collate these data. Moreover, there were inconsistent approaches across locations regarding consultation/participation in design of WASH service users.

Recommendations
The following key recommendations are made based on the evaluation findings and conclusions. The recommendations have been tested with key stakeholders (via review process). Annex XII also provides detailed problem statements associated with each of the following key recommendations.

Recommendation 1
UNICEF in Iraq to develop formal guidelines for transition of emergency-to-development WASH programming. In alignment with the 2022 ‘WASH Cluster Roadmap for Transition of the Humanitarian Response in Iraq’, formal guidelines would provide a framework for nexus programming, and thus support timely and structured transitioning approaches. In order to support efforts at operational and coordination level within UNICEF, the development of nexus guidelines could consider local, regional and national factors related to the implementation of LHD initiatives. Critically, actioning this recommendation should include active participation of nexus-relevant governmental actors at all stages of the processes, such as terms of reference (ToR) development, planning, drafting and final approval stages. The process should also include documenting lessons learned in transition. Ultimately, such guidelines may provide utility beyond Iraq to other similarly protracted, middle-income aid contexts.

As an extension of the previous point: the success of LHD/nexus approaches and the implementation of durable solutions cannot be achieved by one sector or lead coordination agency. Thus, guidelines could consider practical guidelines and clear strategies for coordination with other UN agencies with overlapping sectoral objectives and activities.

Recommendation 2
UNICEF in Iraq should undertake systematic and comprehensive assessment of WASH innovations and pilots of both current and future interventions. Suggested indicators for such an assessment include efficiency gains, scalability, sustainability. This will help categorization of trialed initiatives, in terms of whether they are most relevant for either humanitarian or development contexts (or as a support to linking both). Findings from this process related to current interventions can then be used to advocate and ensure that future innovations and pilots are undertaken with adequate supporting MEAL processes which a) are linked to standard output and outcome level monitoring, and b) have clearly defined parameters for successful initiatives, and the evidence needed to support such judgements.

Recommendation 3
UNICEF Iraq should review its monitoring system so that it allows for effective monitoring of performance at both outcome and output level. This can allow UNICEF to measure progress against outcome level results; critically review the articulation between outputs and outcomes; adjust programming as needs and the context evolve; and inform the design and implementation of future programming. As a starting point, pursuing this recommendation could consider critically examining and addressing the factors and root causes for discrepancies between progress achieved at output and outcome levels.
Recommendation 4
UNICEF Iraq should review decision-making and communication processes across its internal coordination structure and develop mechanisms to ensure better alignment between senior management, sub-national offices and technical departments. To increase effective coordination and ensure WASH interventions are implemented coherently and with consistent quality, the management roles and communication channels across UNICEF Iraq offices should be clearly defined and widely understood. Initiatives to provide clarity in this regard are eminently actionable, and improved feedback and coordination would serve to support primary WASH objectives such as government-led nexus transition.

Recommendation 5
To improve nexus transition, UNICEF Iraq should continue to strengthen the consistency of quality and sustainability in partner performance by enhancing government-led partnership models. As the quality and sustainability of partnerships varies according to the capacities of individual implementing partners in the context, developing mechanisms for the detection and early warning of lower capacity partners is critical for the success of nexus/LHD objectives. As such, to build upon the nexus agenda, resources for the context should prioritize capacity development of partners (including governmental partners) identified as needing additional strengthening supports.

Recommendation 6
UNICEF Iraq should ensure that equity considerations of those in hard-to-reach-areas are part of determining population targeting in WASH programming. This action can help to better orientate WASH responses towards the most vulnerable and often most underserved groups situated in hard-to-reach areas and informal settlements. WASH monitoring and assessments should be modified and expansive enough to locate and identify the needs of hard-to-reach and/or marginalized populations. They should also support the inputs and active participation of the targeted populations in follow-up actions, as part UNICEF’s commitment to the principles of accountability to affected population (AAP). The application of a ‘gender lens’ to such a process would be appropriate and standard given its focus on better understanding of community vulnerabilities. Although cost efficiencies may not allow for larger WASH infrastructure supports to fragmented and relatively low densities of persons in hard-to-reach areas, flexible programming (e.g. WASH non-food items and hygiene promotion) should consider these highly vulnerable and typically underserved populations, rather than limiting the geographic scope of WASH activities to already supported communities.

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The evaluation was implemented by the consortium of SREO and Hydroconseil, with the following evaluation team: Eoin O’Donnell, Evaluation team Leader – SREO, Rachel Norman, WASH Specialist, Jacques-Edouard Tiberghien, WASH Specialist – Hydroconseil, Wafi Khayat, Technical Specialist – SREO, Solène Le Pape, Junior Technical Expert – Hydroconseil, Will Simon, Data Specialist – SREO, Daniel Seckman, SREO Founder and CEO.

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