INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

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From: Gunilla Olsson, Director

Subject: UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti Standard Operating Procedure for Quality Assurance in Research

UNICEF has adopted the organization wide UNICEF Procedure for Quality Assurance in Research (2015) (hereafter 'QA Procedure'). This procedure states that all UNICEF offices and divisions shall "develop and set out clear operating procedures for research quality assurance in their settings".

The UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti) adopts as its operating procedures the principles and standards outlined in the QA Procedure, with a number of precisions and clarifications at different stages of the research process as described in this Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). For a graphic and simplified depiction of the stages in this SOP, see Annex A. This SOP will be updated regularly to include changes in practice or as required.

1.   Initiating new research

❖   Internal Research Steering Committee: UNICEF Innocenti's **Research Review Group (RRG)** fulfils the quality assurance functions of an Internal Research Steering Committee, as outlined in the QA Procedure. It aims to be an open and constructive forum for ALL new project ideas. The RRG will review all new research projects[1] alignment with strategic and thematic priorities, links and synergies with other UNICEF Innocenti research projects, capacity to undertake the research, technical quality, planned external advisory capacities, ethical issues, communication and uptake considerations, and any other relevant operational or technical issues. The group considers research proposals and concept notes (see RRG 2020 ToR).

❖   The Research Manager is responsible for assessing when is the best moment to share the research proposal, idea or outline with the RRG. Please keep in mind that review is strongly encouraged **earlier rather than later.** If in doubt, discuss it with your supervisor, the Directors Office (DO) and/or RRG members. The RRG can review a concept in depth or recommend a seminar and/or collaborations to help further flesh out an idea before assessing it fully.

❖   RRG meetings are held once a month. Projects for review can be added to the agenda via the RRG Secretariat**. The project should be submitted to the RRG using this approved Research Concept Note/Proposal Template (Annex B), at least 1 week in advance to enable sufficient time for review.**

❖   Membership and representation: The representatives who regularly attend the RRG meetings are the:
   o   Rotating Chair – Chief, Social Policy & Economic Analysis team (2020-)
   o   Director
   o   Deputy Director
   o   Chief, Education team

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[1] This SOP adopts the definition of research as outlined in the *Taxonomy for Defining and Classifying UNICEF Research, Evaluation and Studies*. It defines research as "the systematic process of the collection and analysis of data and information, in order to generate new knowledge, to answer a specific question or to test a hypothesis. Its methodology must be sufficiently documented to permit assessment and replication. Research in UNICEF should examine relevant issues and yield evidence for better programme and policy advice."

- o Chief, Child Rights & Protection team
- o Chief, Communication team
- o Chief, Research Facilitation & Knowledge Management team
- o Chief, Strategy & Convening team
- o Senior Adviser, Ethics in Evidence Generation
- o Secretariat – Planning & Monitoring Specialist
- o Research managers[2] and other research specialists as necessary

❖ The Secretariat is in charge of taking minutes during meetings, managing the scheduling and setting the agenda.

❖ If a Chief is unable to attend a meeting, they will nominate a delegate from within their team. If the chief is not the research manager (see below) the research manager/principal investigator will also attend the RRG meeting and present themselves. RRG meetings are open to the members listed above, their delegates (if relevant) and research managers attending on an ad-hoc basis to present their work.

❖ Office seminars: Researchers are also encouraged to present planned research at office seminars to receive additional feedback at an early stage of conceptualization. This can happen either before or after presenting to the RRG, or both before and after.

❖ Definition of "major research": UNICEF Innocenti adopts the definition of "major" research outlined in the QA Procedure: "projects that last longer than 18 months and/or have a budget above 100,000 USD". A "major" research project will have an advisory committee which includes external experts[3]. Note that some projects that are not defined as "major research" may also need an external advisory function; the RRG can advise on this.

❖ Outputs from all research: Research projects will have multiple outputs, but not all will require sign-off from the Director/Deputy Director. See Box 1 for List of Approved Innocenti Publications and Final Sign-Off/Review Timescales.

❖ Research uptake: The research manager is responsible for devising the research uptake plan in collaboration with RFKM.

❖ Recording research on UNICEF's Evaluation and Research Tool (EISI)[4]: All approved and completed research and associated outputs should be recorded in EISI by the research manager or an EISI focal point from the research section. EISI requires you to upload the Concept Note, ToR, start and end dates, and the budget, as a minimum; the 'Contact Person' is the Research Manager and the 'Approver'

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[2] The research manager is responsible for identifying the appropriate stages of the research process for review by the RRG, the overall management of the research project (e.g. Principal Investigator, commissioner of contract). The research manager is responsible for managing the project's planning, deliverables, peer review, communication, monitoring of research uptake, and any other tasks required for successful completion.

[3] UNICEF's QA Procedure states that advisory boards/committees can include 'national or international technical experts (academics, researchers), specialists from UN and other international organizations, specialists from government, and specialists from civil society and other grassroots organizations'.

[4] EISI is the Evidence Initiative for Systems Integration replacing the Evaluation and Research Database (ERDB) jointly managed by UNICEF Innocenti and the Evaluation Office. EISI integrates the ERDB with the UNICEF evidence systems GEROS, EMRT and PRIME.

is the Chief of Section. Training will be provided by RFKM on the use of EISI, as well as support to research managers on how they can complete these tasks. All research plans and final outputs from the research should be updated in EISI on an **ongoing basis**.

2. **During the implementation of research**
   ❖ Research ethics: All research collecting primary data or analysing sensitive secondary data will follow the principles and standards outlined in the [UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis](#) in the first instance. This involves making sure that research proposals, instruments and protocols go through the relevant ethics board or panel. Researchers should consult with the Senior Ethics Adviser at UNICEF Innocenti as necessary.

3. **Internal review of research outputs**
   ❖ Before sharing your outputs externally, ensure all outputs are reviewed by your supervisor, any country or regional offices involved, and any partners as necessary.

4. **Final review**
   ❖ Guidelines for format and style: Authors of research products should review [the guidelines for formatting Innocenti Working & Discussion Papers](#) and for [formatting references and citations](#). Authors should also consult the [UNICEF brand style book](#) and the [UNICEF writing style guide](#).

   ❖ Documenting the review process: All research publications must outline the type of peer review undertaken and include a Conflict of Interest[5] section disclosure (e.g. 'No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors'). The recommended place for this disclosure is the inside page of the publication, which also holds the acknowledgements, contact details, etc.

   ❖ The research manager and the UNICEF Innocenti editor will keep the records of external peer-review comments. The research manager is responsible for submitting the records to the editor when requesting publication.

   ❖ External peer review: The external peer review process for research published on the UNICEF Innocenti website goes beyond the minimum standards required by the [UNICEF (organization-wide) Procedure for Quality Assurance of Research (2015)](#). All research publications will undergo an external peer review by 1 UNICEF staff member (not from Innocenti) and at least 2 independent non-UNICEF reviewers[6], recognized as experts in the relevant field and able to provide expert, impartial, and high-quality comments.

   ❖ The reviewers will use the standard UNICEF Innocenti Peer Review form (see Annex C) and at a minimum provide a recommendation as to whether the output is suitable for publication or should be

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[5] In accordance with UNICEF (2012), Financial Disclosure and Declaration of Interest Statements, Executive Directive CF/EXD/2012-003, staff must disclose actual or potential conflicts of interests to their head of office and the Ethics Office. Further advice regarding conflict of interest can be found in UN (2013), Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service, International Civil Service Commission, New York.

[6] The 2 independent non-UNICEF reviewers can also be members of the Advisory Board.

revised or rejected. In cases where research is being published externally and the external publisher does not have a review process, then the publication should go through the standard Innocenti Peer Review process using the form in Annex C.

❖ Final sign-off on publications: In most cases, all research outputs and external journal articles will require final sign-off by the Director/Deputy Director before being published as a UNICEF Innocenti publication; this may be delegated to section chiefs on a case by case basis, or as necessary. **Individuals should not sign off work they have authored/co-authored.**

Box 1: List of Approved UNICEF Innocenti Publications and Final Sign-off/Review Timescales

List of approved UNICEF Innocenti publication types (based on UNICEF Innocenti's Publication Series page at: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/, updated September 2020)	External peer review by 1 UNICEF staff + 2 external reviewers	Responsible for final sign off or final review (not an author/co-author)	Maximum time for final sign-off or review (negotiable)
UNICEF Innocenti Report Card: In keeping with UNICEF's mandate to advocate for children in every country, the Centre's Report Card series focuses on the well-being of children in industrialized countries. Each Report Card includes a league table that ranks OECD countries according to their record on the subject under discussion. The Report Cards are designed to appeal to a wide audience while maintaining academic rigour.	n/a (NatComs and advisory board provide external reviews)	Director/Deputy Director UNICEF Innocenti and DED Innovation	1 week
Best of UNICEF Research and Evaluation: Innocenti and the Evaluation Office join forces to find the most rigorous UNICEF studies with greatest influence on policies and programmes that benefit children and showcase these in an annual co-produced publication.	n/a	Director/Deputy Director	1 week
UNICEF Innocenti Working Papers: the foundation of the Office's research output, underpinning many of its other publications. These high-quality research papers are aimed at an academic and well-informed audience, contribute to ongoing discussion on a wide range of child-related issues and are introduced with a concise, accessible box of key data, findings and/or recommendations.	YES	Section Chief	2 weeks
UNICEF Innocenti fast-track working papers: High quality research papers produced in a shorter timescale in response to a particular issue.	YES	Director/Deputy Director	1 week
UNICEF Innocenti Research Reports: present in-depth studies on priority themes, usually with well-developed conclusions and policy recommendations and are introduced with a concise, accessible box of key data, findings and/or recommendations.	YES	Section Chief	2 weeks
UNICEF Innocenti Research Briefs: short papers intended to provide the latest data, analysis, methods and information on a wide range of issues affecting children. The series addresses various sub-themes in a concise and accessible format, convenient for programme managers and decision makers.	YES	Section Chief	2 weeks
Miscellanea: Annual Report, blogs, think pieces and other publications that do not fit under other series.	Case by case basis	Case by case basis	Case by case basis
Journal articles: Innocenti experts produce high quality research that is frequently published in international peer reviewed journals. The themes of publications featured here reflect the entire spectrum of issues shaping global policies and outcomes for children.	YES before submitting to a journal	Director/Deputy Director, once the final version is accepted by a journal	2 days

- ❖ **For working papers, research reports and research briefs:** Send your output to the Director/Deputy Director or the Section Chief with the peer review form (Annex C) and a short summary via email that outlines: i) your peer review process and any major issues addressed via peer review; and ii) the political risks or sensitivities, research limitations or weaknesses, and the value this publication adds.

- ❖ **For external journal articles:** First, send your journal article to the Section Chief and any advisory boards and partners for final review. All external journal articles must follow the UNICEF Guidance on External Academic Publishing which recommends that authors should select open access journals that allow UNICEF to retain the copyright. Once the final version of a journal article has been accepted by a publication, send the article to the Director/Deputy Director for sign off. The Head of Office/Division is the only person who can sign publisher agreements for the transfer or limitation of UNICEF copyright.
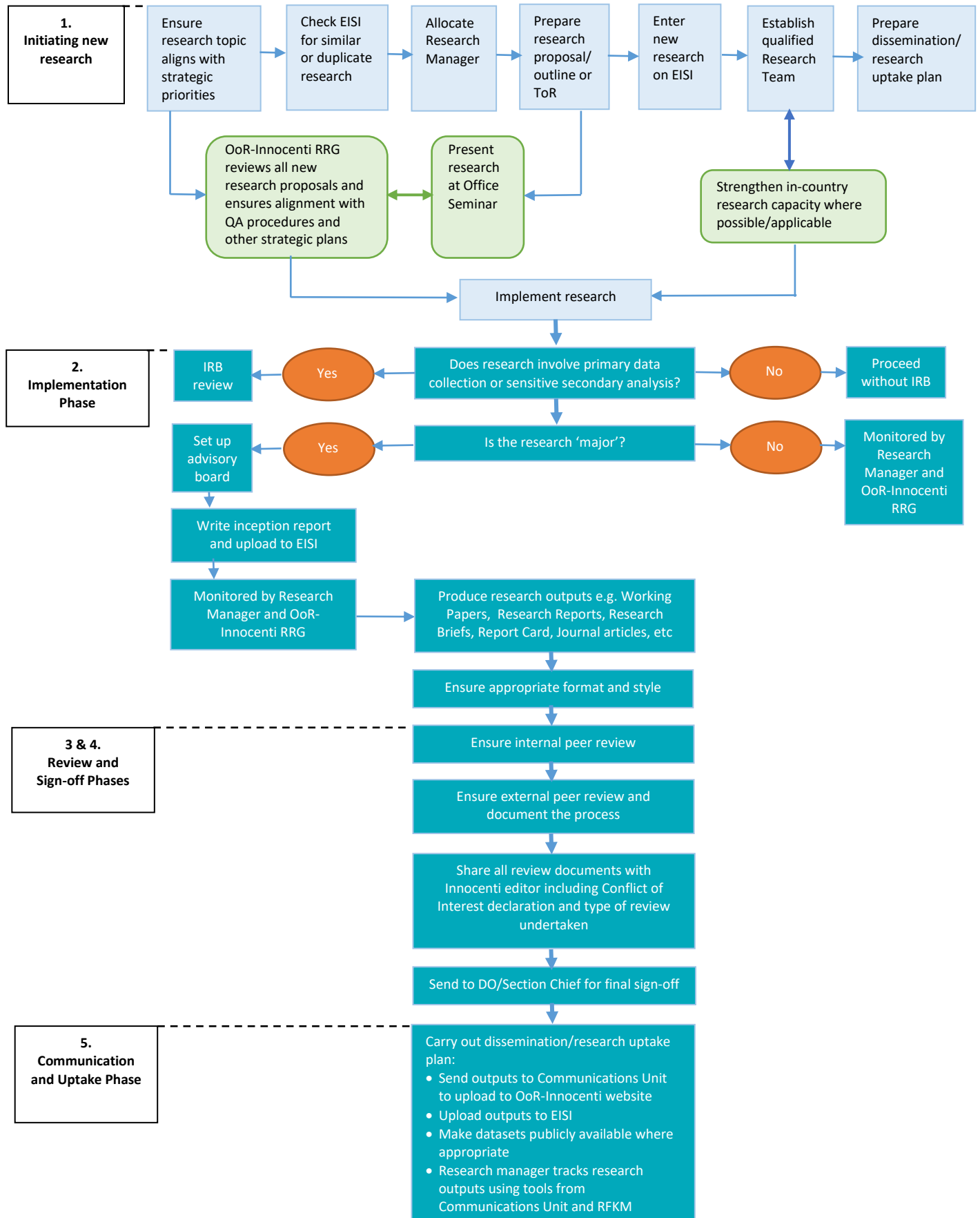
5. Communication and Uptake

- ❖ Communication and monitoring of uptake: Mechanisms can be employed to track the outputs and outcomes of all research intended to influence policy and programmes. Examples include monitoring citations, downloads, presentations to key stakeholders, media mentions, and any references to the research in policy documents. A number of tools are available from the Communications Unit and RFKM to help research managers track outputs. The Communications Unit will upload all approved publications to the UNICEF Innocenti external website, register publications in the RePec database and are responsible for monitoring site visits, and downloads via Google Analytics and activity on Innocenti's social media channels. In addition, RFKM uses Plum Analytics to track how Innocenti outputs are shared and cited elsewhere on the internet (for example in blogs, news articles, policy documents and also on social media) and Overton to track citations in policy documents. These metrics are analysed and presented in monthly and annual reports produced by the Communications and RFKM units and can also be extracted for specific purposes.

- ❖ The Research Manager should also consider uploading any outputs which may help internal decision-making or capacity-building e.g. guidance, tools, synthesis products etc. to the UNICEF Innocenti Sharepoint site to help ensure internal knowledge sharing. The RFKM team can provide support with uploading these outputs.

6. Office specific templates:

- ❖ Annex A: A simplified research quality assurance process as depicted in this Standard Operating Procedure and the UNICEF Procedure for Quality Assurance in Research
- ❖ Annex B: Office of Research-Innocenti Research Concept Note/Proposal Template
- ❖ Annex C: Innocenti Research QA Process Peer Review Form

ANNEX A: A SIMPLIFIED RESEARCH QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS AS DEPICTED IN THIS STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE AND THE UNICEF PROCEDURE FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RESEARCH

1. Initiating new research

Ensure research topic aligns with strategic priorities → Check EISI for similar or duplicate research → Allocate Research Manager → Prepare research proposal/outline or ToR → Enter new research on EISI → Establish qualified Research Team → Prepare dissemination/research uptake plan

OoR-Innocenti RRG reviews all new research proposals and ensures alignment with QA procedures and other strategic plans ↔ Present research at Office Seminar

Strengthen in-country research capacity where possible/applicable

Implement research

2. Implementation Phase

Does research involve primary data collection or sensitive secondary analysis?
- Yes → IRB review
- No → Proceed without IRB

Is the research 'major'?
- Yes → Set up advisory board
- No → Monitored by Research Manager and OoR-Innocenti RRG

Set up advisory board → Write inception report and upload to EISI → Monitored by Research Manager and OoR-Innocenti RRG → Produce research outputs e.g. Working Papers, Research Reports, Research Briefs, Report Card, Journal articles, etc → Ensure appropriate format and style

3 & 4. Review and Sign-off Phases

Ensure internal peer review → Ensure external peer review and document the process → Share all review documents with Innocenti editor including Conflict of Interest declaration and type of review undertaken → Send to DO/Section Chief for final sign-off

5. Communication and Uptake Phase

Carry out dissemination/research uptake plan:
- Send outputs to Communications Unit to upload to OoR-Innocenti website
- Upload outputs to EISI
- Make datasets publicly available where appropriate
- Research manager tracks research outputs using tools from Communications Unit and RFKM

OFFICE OF RESEARCH-INNOCENTI
RESEARCH CONCEPT NOTE/PROPOSAL TEMPLATE

Project Title	

Date	
Summary of research	*200 words*
Main deliverables	*List*
Geographic or population focus	*Could include region(s)/countries and/or gender, age, equity considerations*
Partners	*Specify who you will be working with on this activity*
Specify Consultations done within OoR, rest of UNICEF offices or other partners	*Whether initial discussions and ideas have been shared with other relevant constituencies within OoR, UNICEF or other partners. These are more than the partners above.*
AWP Outcome & Output Area	*Derived from your work plans*
Budget	
Time-frame	*Specify duration of the project*
Version #	
Research Manager/ Contact Person	*This is the focal point for contact and other follow up actions*
Reviews/notes	*Note here if the proposal/ concept has been reviewed previously, by RRG or others. And any major revisions.* *If preparing a full proposal intended for donors, research managers should check proposals against the check list in this guide Proposal Tips @ Innocenti.*

1. **Relevance and motivation/Justification (clearly articulate why this fills an evidence gap)**
2. **Relationship with broader goals (UNICEF/SDGs/ Others)**
3. **Specific Objectives and research questions**
4. **Research approach and methods (also noting the limitations of this approach)**
5. **Ethical considerations (including quality assurance)**
6. **Expected outcomes, deliverables and intended impacts (what will change as a result of this project, who).** Some examples could include:
   - Building evidence base
   - Inform policy, advocacy and programmes
   - Capacity development
7. **What is the plan for research uptake and communications?**
8. **Proposed time frame**
9. **Resources**
   - Total Estimated budget: US$
   - Available Funds: *(include WBS)*
   - Budget shortfall and fundraising plan, if applicable

Sample budget table for proposals			
		Costs items	**USD**
	Outcome	*Select from AWP*	
	Output	*Select from AWP*	
X.1	**Staff**	*Do not include consultancy related costs here*	
X.2	**Travel**	*Do not include consultancy related costs here*	
X.X	**Activities**		
X.X			
X.X			
3.X		Research governance, M&E and support costs (cross-office)	
		Total programmable costs	
		Indirect recovery rate (8%)	
		Grant total	

10. **Proposed operational arrangements with partners and coordination, and within the office (outlining the roles and responsibilities of each)**
11. **Risks and quality assurance**
12. **References/Bibliography**

ANNEX C: UNICEF OFFICE OF RESEARCH - INNOCENTI RESEARCH QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS

PEER REVIEW FORM

Publication details (completed by research manager)	
Paper Title	
Name of coordinator/ author/ or anonymous	
Review due date	
Expected publication product	Choose an item.
	Other:

Reviewer recommendations	
Do you recommend this paper for publication?	Choose an item.

Reviewer comments	
Have comments been made in **tracked-changes on the manuscript**? If yes, only the most salient points need to be captured here. (see guidelines)	Choose an item.
What revisions do you recommend before publication? *Note a reference (such as page # and/ or line #) ahead of relevant comment*	
Box will expand as you write	

REVIEWER GUIDELINES

This section provides general guidance for reviewers (internal and external), to assist in completing the peer review form. Reviewers can provide an overall assessment of the paper, highlighting major and essential revisions, as well as suggestions, support and criticism for improvement. Comments and revisions can also be provided in track-changes[7] in the manuscript. These questions might be helpful to the reviewer in structuring constructive suggestions for strengthening the paper. The author or research coordinator may have others to include.

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[7] When using track changes in Word, the reviewers name can be anonymized in Word by selecting > Review, then >Track Changes Options, > Change User Name.

- **Relevance:** Is the research relevant? Does it bring attention to a neglected area deserving further inquiry? Does it contribute to advancing work or adding new knowledge in this area? What are the ethical considerations of this research? What are the potential controversial issues?
- **Conceptualisation:** Is the research question well-defined? Does the paper present a clear and relevant conceptualisation of the issue? Is the work well-situated within the existing literature?
- **Potential for Impact:** (**Where relevant**) Does the research demonstrate potential for impact? Is it likely to stimulate policy debate, improve effectiveness of interventions, etc.? What does this paper contribute to current thinking, policy and/or practice on the topic?
- **Methodology (where relevant):** Are the methods appropriate? Is the methodology clearly documented? Have ethics been sufficiently addressed?
- **Writing and presentation:** Is the paper well-organized and clearly and succinctly written? Are the arguments clearly presented? Is the paper written in a lively and attractive style?
- **Conclusions and recommendations**: Are the conclusions clear and are they supported by the evidence? (Where relevant) Are the conclusions concrete and sufficiently clear to be operationally applicable?
- **Title:** Does the title reflect the content of the paper?

Reviewers can refer to the [UNICEF publications catalogue for examples of research products](#).

Action for research managers: Include this peer review form when you send your research output to the DO or Section Chief for sign-off.