

EXECUTIVE DIRECTIVE

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UNICEF Policy on Research

Section 1: Introduction

This document presents a Research Policy for UNICEF. It provides an operational definition of research relevant to UNICEF; sets out the purposes of different types of research within the organization; establishes principles and standards that should guide research undertaken by UNICEF staff or in collaboration with partners; and clarifies the mandate and role of different parts of the organization undertaking or managing research and in implementing this policy.

The policy acknowledges the critical role of research in generating high quality evidence that can support policy, programming and advocacy on behalf of children; identifying emerging and strategic issues for the organization; and contributing to global knowledge on children. It affirms the commitment of UNICEF to respecting the integrity of research processes and findings within the organization.¹

This policy recognizes that almost all parts of UNICEF, including Country Offices (COs), Regional Offices (ROs) and most Headquarter divisions (HQ), are involved in research.² The policy applies to all research whether commissioned or undertaken by UNICEF alone or carried out in partnership with others.

Research commissioned or undertaken by UNICEF builds on the strengths offered by the decentralized structure of the organization which enables researchers to respond to local needs and demands and to connect with local partners. However, this decentralized structure of research production also requires complementary efforts to ensure coordination and information sharing, to identify potential synergies and to set common standards. This policy is therefore complemented by other procedures, guidelines and reference materials which together contribute to a more unified approach to research within UNICEF. These include:

- (1) *A Framework for Research 2014-17*, which sets out the key thematic priorities for UNICEF research under the period of the present Strategic Plan ([link](#));
- (2) *UNICEF Procedure for Quality Assurance in Research*, *UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis*, and *Guidance Note on External Academic Publishing*, which provide further details on the principles and standards established by this policy ([link](#));

¹ The importance of governance, standards and accountabilities of UNICEF research was highlighted by the 2013 Audit of the Office of Research.

² National Committees also conduct research and are encouraged to apply the standards in this policy to the research they carry out or commission through partners.

(3) *The Evaluation and Research Database, PRIME*³ (the online version of the integrated monitoring, evaluation and research plan) and related tools and guidance, which serve to assure an adequate internal sharing and dissemination of research (Links: [ERDB](#); [PRIME](#)).

Section 2: Research within UNICEF: Purpose and Definition

Within UNICEF, research is undertaken or commissioned in order to generate evidence that can inform and guide policy, programming and advocacy on behalf of children. Research undertaken within UNICEF helps to position the organization as a leading source of evidence on issues of relevance for the well-being and development of children in different contexts. Together with *data collection* and *evaluation*, research is one of three key pillars of UNICEF's evidence generation efforts.

Research may examine particular issues of direct relevance to UNICEF's strategic objectives and programmes, fill identified knowledge or evidence gaps, or assess how interventions deliver results for children.

In addition, research plays a critical role in bringing new ideas and perspectives to the organization, where necessary challenging and reorienting UNICEF's strategy and programming, and enabling it to respond to new issues as they arise. To be a knowledge leader, UNICEF needs to be able to identify knowledge gaps and explore emerging issues, even when these may challenge existing organizational positions and practices.

Research within UNICEF may take many forms, spanning multiple academic disciplines and sectoral areas, and applying a wide range of research methods as appropriate to the question under investigation.

Definition

For the purposes of this policy, the following definition of research is used:⁴

"...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 at UNICEF should examine relevant issues and yield evidence for better programme and policy advice."

The above definition identifies distinguishing features of 'research,' in relation to other UNICEF evidence generating activities – including 'evaluation', 'studies' and 'data collection'— while recognizing complementarities and overlaps.

³ PRIME is the online version of the Integrated Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Plan (IMEP/IMERP). At time of writing, the PRIME is still in a pilot phase, but will soon become available to all offices and divisions, making it possible to check UNICEF research plans across countries and regions.

⁴ Definitions of research, evaluation and studies and related activities are contained in the [UNICEF Procedure for Quality Assurance in Research](#).

Evaluations are “An assessment, as systematic and impartial as possible, of an activity, project, programme, strategy, policy, topic, theme, sector, operational area or institutional performance. It focuses on expected and achieved accomplishments examining the results chain, processes, contextual factors and causality, in order to understand achievements or the lack thereof. It aims at determining the relevance, impact, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the interventions and contributions of the organizations of the United Nations system.” (UN Evaluation Group definition, referenced in the revised UNICEF Evaluation Policy 2013). While there is a clear overlap between evaluation and some types of research in terms of methodological requirements, evaluations have a specific corporate function and are governed by a separate policy.

Studies pull together existing information around a topic through the “*summarization, interpretation or assessment of information and data.*” Examples can include rapid assessments, literature/desk reviews, and mapping exercises. While this policy applies specifically to research as defined above, the principles and standards identified here would usually be applicable also to studies.

Data collection is an essential part of the research process, as defined above. However, data collection which is not an integrated part of a systematic process to answer a specific research question - for instance, data collection primarily to produce descriptive statistics or for programme monitoring purposes - would fall outside this definition of research.

Section 3: Scope of Application of the Policy

Research is undertaken or supported directly across most parts of the organization, often in collaboration with partners. This policy applies to research carried out and commissioned by all parts of UNICEF – including Country Offices (COs), Regional Offices (ROs), and Headquarters Divisions (HQ) – internally or in partnership with external researchers. UNICEF National Committees are also encouraged to apply relevant sections of the policy when engaging in research activities.

Section 4: Guiding Principles and Standards

All research supported and conducted by UNICEF staff should adhere to the following general principles and standards. Additional procedures are elaborated in the [*UNICEF Procedure for Quality Assurance in Research*](#) and the [*UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis*](#).

1. **Relevance.** Research undertaken within UNICEF should address well-defined questions of relevance to advancing the rights and well-being of children, their families and communities. Relevance may be defined in relation to immediate interventions or programme goals, or to strategic, emerging and future challenges.
2. **Quality.** The credibility and legitimacy of any research findings and resulting recommendations rest on the quality of the research process. This is an outcome of several factors including: (i) the objectivity and impartiality of the process through which questions are framed, methodologies chosen, and the research designed and implemented, as well as how data is shared and results communicated; (ii) adherence to accepted academic standards in acknowledging the work of others, and providing

sources and references; (iii) replicability and transparency of methods with outputs subject to peer review.

3. **Adherence to ethical standards.** All research undertaken or supported by UNICEF that involves primary data collection from human subjects or the analysis of sensitive secondary data must explicitly consider its ethical implications and ensure that the rights and well-being of research subjects are respected throughout the research process. This entails reflection, planning and management of research and its outcomes to ensure that: the benefits of the research are maximized and risks to participants are mitigated; appropriate mechanisms are in place to ensure the privacy of participants and the security of their data; participants are respected through appropriate and informed consent processes; the need for and nature of any payment or compensation is carefully considered; and that there is full disclosure of any conflict of interest.
4. **Accessibility.** UNICEF considers research on children to be a global public good and a principle of 'open access' should operate by default for all research undertaken or funded by UNICEF. This should include publication in open access journals where possible. On sensitive findings, the UNICEF [Disclosure Policy](#) and the [UNICEF Publication Policy](#) provide directions.
5. **Prioritization and resourcing.** A well-planned and strategically oriented research agenda is necessary in order to maximize the value of research produced, and to avoid duplication of effort and resources. Research agendas developed within different parts of the organization should be consistent with and contribute to UNICEF's established planning processes. Proposals for research should include a review of relevant existing or on-going research, while the PRIME database should be consulted to check whether similar research is planned or taking place in another part of UNICEF.
6. **Communication of findings.** Outputs of UNICEF research should be shared extensively, both within and outside UNICEF, allowing others to verify results as well as increasing potential uptake and lesson-learning. Where appropriate, engagement with policy makers and practitioners, and dissemination and outreach plans should be costed and integrated into the design of research projects from the outset. The knowledge management function within UNICEF plays an important role in these respects. All UNICEF-supported research should be uploaded to the [Evaluation and Research Database](#) (ERDB) when completed.
7. **Partnerships:** UNICEF staff are encouraged to undertake research in collaboration with appropriately qualified individuals and institutions. Research undertaken in partnership should adhere to UNICEF policies and procedures. Where appropriate, research should be designed to strengthen local research capacity, and should respect the intellectual contributions of each partner.

Section 5: Roles and Responsibilities

The key roles and responsibilities of different parts of the organization in relation to implementation of the policy on research are outlined below.

Overall responsibility for implementation of the research policy and for research quality assurance rests with UNICEF heads of offices and divisions, following guidance developed by the Office of Research-Innocenti. Clear operating procedures should be established by offices/divisions that adhere to the minimum standards outlined in the Quality Assurance and Ethics [Procedures](#) and other official guidance on research.

Country Offices (COs) conduct the majority of research in UNICEF. Research plays an increasingly important role in country programmes through its contribution to evidence-building and its role in strengthening research capacity and maintaining partnerships with the local academic community. Key points in the country programme cycle, such as the Situation Analysis and periodic reviews, provide strategic opportunities to identify evidence gaps and research priorities, set the research agenda, allocate resources and ensure high standards of research are maintained.

Regional Offices (ROs) support COs in their regions by: providing technical support to the development of research agendas; taking a lead in multi-country research programmes in their regions; overseeing and promoting quality assurance and the application of ethical standards; and providing a platform for sharing research methods and results across the region. The team of *Regional advisors* provide thematic support to research initiatives in their respective areas, including identifying linkages and potential synergies among country office efforts. Each Regional Office will determine the optimal organization and assignment of responsibilities for carrying out these functions. This includes the identification of a *focal point* to coordinate the development of the regional research agenda, promote standards on quality assurance and ethics, and support research coordination and sharing of findings across the region.

The HQ thematic and programme sections are responsible for identifying key evidence gaps and research priorities in their thematic areas, leading global and cross-country research programmes and acting as focal points for global research networks in their field of expertise.

The Division of Data, Research and Policy is responsible for leadership and coordination of UNICEF's strategic policy, planning, evidence and knowledge management functions. The Division brings together the *Data and Analytics* section, the *Policy, Strategy and Networks* section, the *Policy Planning Unit* and the *Office of Research – Innocenti*. It thus links evidence generation and knowledge management with the use of evidence in policies, programmes and advocacy.

Coordinating bodies:

The main coordinating body for research in UNICEF is the *Standing Committee on Data and Research*, chaired by the Director of the *Office of Research-Innocenti*.

The role of the Standing Committee is to identify, prioritize and propose needs and opportunities for UNICEF in relation to the generation of evidence related to children. It steers the development, review and updating of corporate research and data strategies and policies for UNICEF. Its membership includes representatives of Divisions and Offices that are significant stakeholders in the generation and use of data and research.

The Standing Committee periodically reports to the *Committee for Global and Regional Programmes*.

An interdivisional *Task Force on Research* serves as the technical arm of the Standing Committee, providing preparatory inputs and acting as a sounding board on initiatives.

Section 6: The Office of Research-Innocenti

The Office of Research-Innocenti is the dedicated research office of UNICEF, with a mandate both to undertake research and to exercise a research leadership role across the organization. To deliver on its mandate the Office must work closely with all parts of UNICEF, including headquarters, and regional and country offices.

The Office of Research-Innocenti is responsible for developing and implementing a research agenda that is strategic and forward looking, identifying upcoming challenges and opportunities both for UNICEF and for the global community working on issues affecting children. The agenda should focus on filling strategic knowledge gaps and needs that are relevant to the overall mandate of UNICEF. The Office also undertakes critical research on sensitive and emerging issues that can serve an important 'challenge' function within UNICEF, testing and proposing alternative policies and solutions, and thus advancing existing knowledge.

The Office of Research-Innocenti also supports and facilitates the research of other parts of UNICEF. It does this through the development of appropriate procedures and guidelines, establishing quality and ethical standards, facilitating the development of an institutional research agenda, providing guidance and promoting best practice in research and research management, and providing technical assistance for research to other offices/units where appropriate. It collaborates closely with other parts of the *Division of Data, Research and Policy* in this range of knowledge management functions and in the use of evidence for strategic policy goals.

In order to fulfil its research mandate while also ensuring the legitimacy of its research within the wider academic and policy communities, the Office of Research-Innocenti develops its research agenda, in consultation both with other parts of the organization and with external stakeholders. The research agenda is then jointly approved by the Deputy Executive Directors of Partnerships and Programmes, after which the Office of Research implements it. It also retains editorial independence over its research products, including publications on research

methods, research syntheses or assessments of research, with responsibility for signing off on such publications resting with the Director. Autonomy in each of these areas is fundamental for ensuring the credibility and quality of its research outputs.

The Director of the Office of Research-Innocenti is responsible for developing the research agenda of the Office in consultation with others; for raising funds to implement the agenda; for assuring the quality of research and outputs produced by the Office, and for ensuring that outputs feed into relevant policy and decision making channels. The Director is supported in these functions by an independent advisory committee. To fulfil these roles, the Office also requires administrative procedures which support its objectives, as well as the ability to develop and manage partnerships with external research institutions and funders.

Section 7: Working with Partners

UNICEF frequently conducts research in partnership with other individuals and organizations, including academic or research institutes, think tanks, governments and NGOs.

Research partnerships should be managed according to the principles laid out in this policy and elaborated in other procedures and guidelines. They should be managed in a way that respects the knowledge and resources each party contributes; be based on principles of transparency and trust; be mutually beneficial; and respect the intellectual contributions and authorship of each party.

The selection of partners and the agreements with them should be based on the qualifications and expertise of the research team and the quality of the proposed methodology. Value for money, rather than low cost, should be the key criterion for selecting a research partner.

Research often benefits from long-term partnerships which can also be used to strengthen the capacities of research partners where these are weak. UNICEF-supported research should be designed where possible to strengthen local research capacity in programme countries, by involving partners in all phases of the research process.

Section 8: External Publication of Research Supported by UNICEF

UNICEF encourages its staff and research partners to disseminate research findings through academic and professional publications, or other appropriate dissemination mechanisms. Academic publication contributes to global knowledge formation, provides a stamp of quality and credibility, and may provide additional incentives for UNICEF staff and partners to engage in high-quality research.

As indicated above, wherever possible and appropriate, UNICEF-supported research should be published in open access journals. For further details, including on issues of copyright and outside activities by UNICEF staff, a guidance note on external academic publishing is being finalized.

Section 9: Resources

UNICEF's key research resource is its staff and the partnerships they form with appropriately qualified research institutes and other relevant bodies.

To strengthen UNICEF's culture of research, qualified staff should be provided with opportunities and time to build their research capacity⁵ and be recognized for their achievements. Involvement in relevant and well-designed research projects should be encouraged both at the individual and office level. This can be done for example through the recognition of high quality research outputs (as in the 'Best of UNICEF Research' annual competition), through an emphasis on research competencies in relevant job descriptions, and through acknowledging good research during performance appraisals.

Staff involved in research should have access to the necessary tools and information sources to carry out their work. These could include appropriate technology, access to research information systems including online journals and databases, data analysis tools, and dissemination platforms.

UNICEF's commitment to research as part of its evidence generation strategy requires a significant investment of financial resources, including for the staff capacities to manage research and related activities.

Research and evidence needs should be considered when developing the UNICEF Strategic Plan, Country Programme Documents, the Global and Regional Programme, sector and cross-sectoral strategies, and Office/Division Management Plans. When allocating regular resources, or when negotiating budgets with external funders, due attention should be given to the allocation of resources for identified priorities related to research and other forms of evidence generation.

Section 10: Monitoring and Reporting

The following mechanisms will be used for monitoring and reporting related to this policy.

i) Basis for monitoring: All planned research should be entered into the PRIME system. When planning research, the system should be searched to identify potential overlap or opportunities for collaboration in UNICEF. All completed research outputs should be uploaded onto the Evaluation and Research Data Base (ERDB).⁶ These systems are connected to each other and to the Country Office Annual Reporting (COAR) portal allowing for the capture of data on who is doing research where, the research topics, partners, spending, oversight, and outputs.

⁵ Capacity building schemes may include: bringing in external expertise to build skills in research design, data collection and analysis methods, data visualization, research uptake strategies, etc; supporting staff to present at international conferences and other forums; cross-fertilization of research experiences and knowledge via regional and global meetings, and online forums; and creating opportunities for UNICEF staff to train their national counterparts in research.

⁶ See: <https://icon.unicef.org/apps02/cop/edb/Lists/Evaluation%20Reports/Research.aspx> Since 2014, it has been a requirement to upload research to the ERDB via COAR.

ii) Compliance with related procedures on quality assurance of research and on ethical standards: All research must adhere to the requirements outlined in the quality assurance and ethics procedures as relevant. As established under UNICEF procedures, compliance may be subject to internal audit.

iii) Additional quality assessment of significant research products: In addition to the quality assurance mechanisms built into individual research projects, all research-producing entities are invited to annually submit their most significant research products to the Office of Research for assessment of quality, with an external expert panel assessing a sub-sample as part of the 'Best of UNICEF Research' competition.

iv) Annual research report: The Office of Research-Innocenti will issue an annual report of its activities, as well as contributing to the report of the Division of Data, Research and Policy. In addition, it will produce a regular report showcasing examples of UNICEF research products that merit special recognition and overviewing research trends, including expenditures, across the organization. This report will be based on an assessment of research outputs which can be submitted by any part of the organization, and on the monitoring of research related databases.

iv) Evaluation and reporting to the Board: Research in UNICEF is expected to be subject to periodic evaluations, with reporting to the Board as appropriate. An organization-wide evaluation of UNICEF research is envisaged for no later than 2018. Following from this evaluation, it is anticipated that the Executive Board would include a session dedicated to research, where implementation of this policy is reported.

Section 11: Contacts

Questions regarding this policy should be directed to research@unicef.org.

Section 12: Entry into Force and Review

The present Executive Directive shall enter into force on the date of its issuance. It is understood that UNICEF may require time to adopt all of its provisions. The Office of Research, supported by other units of the Division of Data, Research and Policy and by the Regional Offices, will devote specific attention to supporting Country Offices in the implementation of this policy. This policy is expected to be reviewed by 2018, based on inputs from the organization-wide research evaluation.



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