EVALUATION OFFICE HQ
Evaluation of the Coverage and Quality of the UNICEF Humanitarian Response in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies

How can UNICEF provide more effective and equitable coverage in complex humanitarian emergencies?

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EDITORIAL INSIGHT

This high-quality, 'high-stakes' evaluation helped UNICEF to tackle tough issues and take stock of the effectiveness of its response to crises in high-profile and high-threat environments. This evaluation enabled a deeper and more systematic analysis of how to better reach affected populations in complex humanitarian emergencies while maintaining principled and high-quality programming.

The panel commended the evaluation's comprehensive and rigorous approach, including the analysis of a huge amount of information (more than 2,000 documents, 11 country case studies and over 500 key informant interviews, plus focus group discussions). Also commended were its well-presented recommendations, which propose practical solutions that are currently being implemented. Internally, the evaluation continues to inform updates to UNICEF's current Strategic Plan, as well as its humanitarian programming and investments in partnerships.

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Women and children gather at a UNICEF-supported mobile health unit in Fafin tented camp, Syrian Arab Republic.

Each year, UNICEF responds on average to 300 humanitarian situations across more than 90 countries, partnering with governments, civil society and other United Nations agencies to help children in need of emergency aid.

Complex humanitarian emergencies often result from a combination of conflict, extreme weather events, hunger and infectious disease outbreaks. These intensely challenging situations threaten hardship and suffering for millions of children and their families, who require rapid assistance, protection and advocacy support. In 2018, UNICEF humanitarian funding rose substantially to US$2.8 billion. Currently, UNICEF allocates more than half of its humanitarian expenditure to emergency situations.

To provide coverage and quality support for those most in need during complex humanitarian emergencies, responses must be agile and context specific. A multidimensional evaluation conducted in 2018, which drew on 11 country case studies, identified UNICEF as a key provider of humanitarian assistance, with impressive coverage in some of the world's most challenging locations. The evaluation also observed, that current reporting mechanisms reinforce the tendency of UNICEF – and the humanitarian sector in general – to prioritize coverage over equity.

PURPOSE

The World Humanitarian Summit 2016 highlighted an increased demand for UNICEF to better address the challenges of complex humanitarian emergencies. In response, UNICEF commissioned this evaluation, which sought to:

- assess the organization's performance in achieving coverage and quality

- identify internal and external enabling factors

- identify, from case studies, good practices and innovations that could be applied more widely

- make recommendations to help UNICEF build on and deepen its substantial achievements.

APPROACH

The evaluation addressed five key questions:

- Is UNICEF achieving coverage and quality in an equitable way?

- Is it influencing others to do so?

- How has UNICEF worked in the field to gain principled access and improve coverage and quality, and how has it forged partnerships to do so?

- Is the UNICEF humanitarian response relevant and adaptable?

- How do the organization's inputs help or hinder coverage and quality?

The evaluation comprised two stages: a pilot phase to test the approach and examine initial findings, and a synthesis review. The mixed methods approach included analysis of more than 2,000 documents, 6 field missions (Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia and Ukraine), 5 desk reviews (Burundi, Mali, Pakistan, the State of Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic) and over 500 key informant interviews with staff and representatives of UNICEF, governments, civil society partners and United Nations agencies. Focus

UNICEF showed organizational courage and tenacity in sustaining its work in complex humanitarian challenges, despite significant challenges.
– Evaluation report

group discussions were also held with over 400 members of communities receiving UNICEF assistance. Additionally, a quantitative data analysis was conducted.

The synthesis review phase enabled the building of knowledge based on past evaluations. Using 30 evaluations of UNICEF humanitarian action (from 2010 to 2016), the evaluation assessed the extent to which the organization had achieved its targets and provided high-quality, equitable coverage; examined the strengths and weaknesses of its approach; and commented on the adequacy of its inputs.

UNICEF has responded to complex humanitarian emergencies through the development of a range of measures to boost operational capacity. These include the Level 3 (L3) Corporate Emergency Activation Procedure, Simplified Standard Operating Procedures, fast-track recruitment processes, Humanitarian Performance Monitoring indicators and, in 2013, a comprehensive review of the organization's performance as the Cluster Lead Agency coordinating partnerships in three sectors.

Limitations

This wide-ranging evaluation was restricted by the limited availability of data, the paucity of documentary evidence on the reasoning behind key decisions and the departure of staff members. Changes in the participation of some UNICEF country offices during the evaluation also proved challenging.

KEY FINDINGS

Lack of adequate data reinforcing coverage over equity

Although UNICEF has provided humanitarian services to a great number of communities in need, accurately calculating coverage according to need is not possible owing to insufficient data collection, disaggregation and reporting. Historically, UNICEF has prioritized collection of age- and sex-disaggregated data, but has been less consistent in analysing other factors contributing to vulnerability. In striving for a balance between coverage and equity, UNICEF country offices typically opt to reach larger, more accessible populations.

Boldly advocating for children

UNICEF has strengthened the coverage and quality of other agencies' responses, mainly through its role as Cluster Lead Agency for water, sanitation and hygiene; nutrition; and education (working in partnership with Save the Children). Progress has included the identification of gaps, promotion of locally relevant standards and boosting of partners' capacity. Nevertheless, despite these achievements, the evaluation highlights issues regarding cluster monitoring and data quality. It notes a common perception that UNICEF is more focused on securing its own access than on working with other agencies to secure access for all.

Limited interpretation of humanitarian principles

Although UNICEF has developed diverse approaches to provide assistance to affected people while conforming to the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, the evaluation found that these approaches are applied inconsistently. Instead, UNICEF staff tend to prioritize the principle of humanity over the other principles. A more nuanced interpretation of what constitutes 'principled access' is needed, which would also influence the work of partners on the ground.
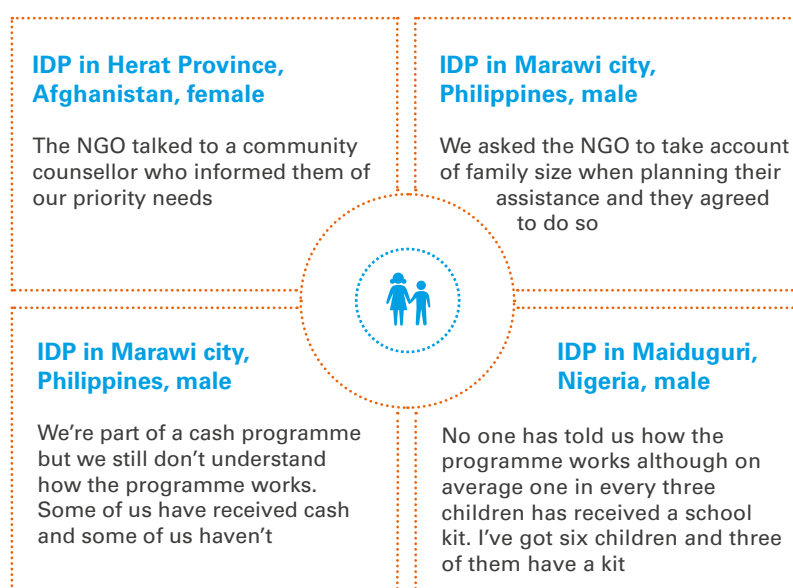
UNICEF often has a good mix of partners. But to maintain principled access, it must develop a better understanding of how these partnerships can be adapted to the dynamic contexts found in complex humanitarian situations. This can be problematic in the context of an integrated United Nations presence, especially when the security management pathway laid out by the United Nations Department for Safety and Security restricts the ability of UNICEF to *stay and deliver*.

Room for improved preparedness and community engagement and humanitarian–development linkages

The evaluation found that UNICEF has a range of tools for formal strategic analysis. However, as a result of the recent shift to operations-oriented analysis, greater alignment with the local context is now needed. Consequently, UNICEF must improve engagement with the communities it supports. Strengthened linkages between humanitarian and development programmes will help to reduce vulnerability and risks over the longer term. Preparedness platforms should help UNICEF to strengthen its planning and adopt a 'no-regrets' procurement process that benefits from a more thorough assessment of suppliers up front.

FIGURE 1

Examples of community engagement in humanitarian programmes

IDP in Herat Province, Afghanistan, female

The NGO talked to a community counsellor who informed them of our priority needs

IDP in Marawi city, Philippines, male

We asked the NGO to take account of family size when planning their assistance and they agreed to do so

IDP in Marawi city, Philippines, male

We're part of a cash programme but we still don't understand how the programme works. Some of us have received cash and some of us haven't

IDP in Maiduguri, Nigeria, male

No one has told us how the programme works although on average one in every three children has received a school kit. I've got six children and three of them have a kit

Source: Author's design
IDP: internally displaced people; NGO: non-governmental organization

Decentralized and empowered, but with constraints

The decentralized structure of UNICEF empowers country offices to take decisions with the support of regional offices. Despite this strong foundation, staff selection, recruitment and retention – particularly of high-performing teams and female staff – have proved difficult. Another constraint emerged in relation to funding: UNICEF has experienced success in managing donor conditions for unearmarked funds, but has been less successful where conditions apply.

INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

This first organizational evaluation of humanitarian assistance successfully navigated the complexities of the humanitarian landscape. By facilitating stakeholder dialogues, it probed tough issues such as the difficulties in gaining access to and reporting on vulnerable target populations, as well as limitations posed by donor conditionality.

UNICEF strategy and positioning

The evaluation recommends pursuing a strategic vision that can achieve a balance between coverage, quality and equity in humanitarian assistance. To meet this vision will require clarification of commitments at the policy level, and more consistent positioning and capacity in UNICEF engagement, both internally and externally. The UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018–2021 was developed prior to the evaluation, but the evaluation informs the organization as it continues to revisit and update policies and procedures – including the UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes' strategic review of humanitarian action and the *Humanitarian Action for Children 202*0 report.

Influence on learning

Several countries requested that the country case studies be expanded into full evaluation reports, and the Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Nigeria and Somalia country offices went ahead with this. This ripple effect of the evaluation should result in a deeper understanding of humanitarian action in these countries and enhanced ownership of the issues and potential solutions.

Generating and using evidence

Shortcomings in monitoring and data collection can hinder decisions regarding humanitarian practice. To address these shortcomings, the evaluation recommends that UNICEF and its partners calculate targets based on assessments of people in greatest need, and consistently and transparently report on changes in these targets. The evaluation also suggests that UNICEF can focus attention on equity by clarifying its expectations, including through context-specific vulnerability and conflict analyses, and assessing its performance against the balance of coverage and equity achieved.

In line with the evaluation's recommendations, the UNICEF Executive Board has encouraged country offices to carry out vulnerability analyses. Discussions between evaluation and programme staff have helped to both clarify the strategic vision and, in particular, obtain disaggregated data to assess the needs of vulnerable populations. These data demonstrate promising progress to date in balancing coverage and equity.

At the country office level, UNICEF has a wealth of good practice in accessing those in greatest need, which is either transferable or which can be taken to scale.
– Evaluation report

Ethical decision-making

Structured, ethical decision-making regarding access relies on a critical understanding of humanitarian principles. The evaluation recommends that staff engaged in sensitive negotiations with state and non-state actors should be adequately supported, as should those partners who may take on additional security risks in delivering support. In engaging with governments (which may be parties to conflict), the evaluation underlines the importance of adhering to humanitarian principles and international law.

Improving accountability

By acting on its commitments to the people it serves and the partners which help it to do so, UNICEF could earn community acceptance as well as valuable community feedback on the relevance of its support. According to the evaluation, this could strengthen access and programme quality and lead to a longer-term improvement in partner capacity. In turn, this could inform better localization of humanitarian action, with the involvement of local partners throughout the programme cycle. The Executive Board has made specific requests to UNICEF, in response to the evaluation, around developing improved approaches to accountability.

Influencing external humanitarian architecture

The evaluation urges UNICEF to promote greater consistency in the United Nations security management system as it applies in a humanitarian context, and to employ UNICEF security officers until such reforms take place. As recommended by the evaluation, UNICEF has shared the evidence and lessons learned from the integrated approach it took with the World Food Programme and World Health Organization in Somalia in 2019.

Adapting internal approaches and systems

The evaluation recommends more consistent and widespread application of the Simplified Standard Operating Procedures adopted by UNICEF to streamline and clarify the humanitarian response to complex emergencies. This recommendation has also been implemented by the Executive Board.
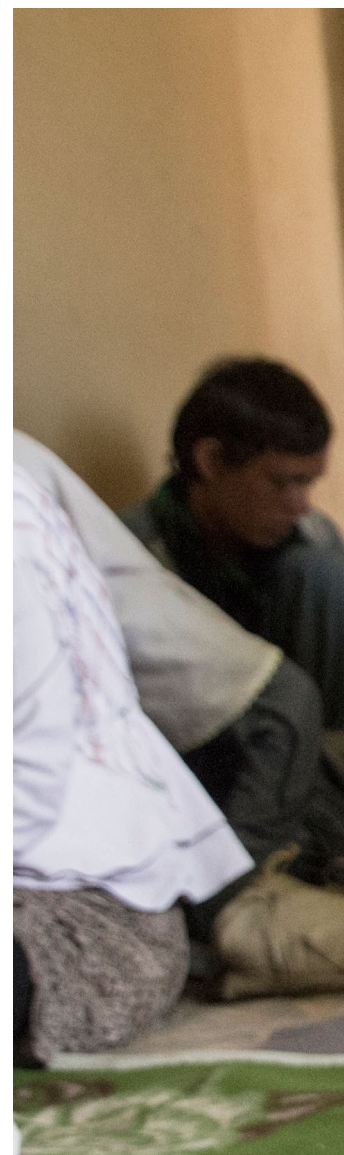
BOX 1

A PIONEERING OVERVIEW OF THE HUMANITARIAN LANDSCAPE

Statutory leave

By tackling difficult questions head on, the evaluation has been able to contribute to:

- embedding evidence generated through the evaluation in key strategies, plans and reports such as *Humanitarian Action for Children 2020*

- clarification of commitments in relation to coverage, quality and equity, through the revision of the CCCs

- updates of policies and procedures within UNICEF's Strategy for Humanitarian Action

- shaping approaches to accountability towards affected populations

- support for vulnerability analyses to better inform targeting and equity.

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Two girls at the Accelerated Learning Centre in Nili district, Darikundi, Afghanistan.

LOOKING AHEAD

UNICEF is in a strong position to advocate for a strategy for accessing in a timely and principled way those people in greatest need of assistance – who are often caught up in complex, high-risk situations, for which limited funding exists. The evaluation's recommendations for more effective and equitable coverage in complex humanitarian emergencies apply not only to UNICEF, but also to the humanitarian system as a whole.

New avenues for capacity development

The evaluation recommends strengthening the capacity of programme staff at all levels, as an essential component for meeting strategic objectives. COVID-19 restrictions caused the planned 2020 launch of a new UNICEF Humanitarian Capacity and Leadership course to be rescheduled for 2021. Rapid evolution and uptake of digital learning tools have already accompanied purposeful collaboration within UNICEF and, through community websites, will support future capacity development initiatives.

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