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Evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025

Summary**

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UNICEF is embarking on the final year of its current Strategic Plan cycle (2022–2025) and in 2024 began developing its next Strategic Plan (2026–2029). With only six years left to fulfil the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNICEF is navigating significant global challenges such as resource constraints, climate change, widening gender inequalities and rising humanitarian crises – all of which threaten children's rights and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

The evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan (2022–2025) represented an accountability and learning commitment made in the UNICEF plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025. It took place against this backdrop of the numerous and significant challenges facing the organization, and aimed to provide a robust assessment of the current Plan and thereby offer insights and actionable recommendations to inform the design of the upcoming Plan. It assessed the Strategic Plan's fitness for purpose, progress to date and, through forecast modelling, likely achievements by the end of the current Strategic Plan period in 2025.

The evaluation found the Plan to be an ambitious and comprehensive framework that provides strategic direction and coherence at global and regional levels, enabling the organization to advance key priorities. However, the Plan's complexity and overlapping elements hinder implementation at the country level, where resource constraints and local contexts take precedence. Significant progress has been made on output-level targets, but outcome-level achievements remain limited due to measurement challenges, operational gaps and insufficient support. Reliance on earmarked funding, complex monitoring demands and resistance to prioritization further constrain systemic change.

* [E/ICEF/2025/1](#).

** The evaluation report summary is being circulated in all official languages. The full report is available in English from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website (see annex).

Note: The *present* document was processed in its entirety by UNICEF.



The evaluation offers seven recommendations to guide the development of the next Strategic Plan, focusing on prioritizing child rights, promoting systemic change, strengthening prioritization and resource mobilization, enhancing adaptive planning, embedding the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, positioning climate action as central, and leveraging data and evidence as strategic drivers of impact. While some of these recommendations require incremental adjustments, others call for more transformational change.

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

I. Introduction

A. Background and context

1. UNICEF is approaching the final year of its current Strategic Plan cycle (2022–2025) and has embarked on the development of its next Strategic Plan for the 2026–2029 period. Since 2022, the world has been recovering from a global pandemic that placed the achievement of child-related Sustainable Development Goals at high risk. With only six more years to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the organization faces significant challenges, including an increasingly constrained resource environment, the accelerating impacts of climate change on children and youth, widening gender inequalities and deepening deprivations for girls and women in many areas, and the heightened risks of rising humanitarian crises threatening the lives and childhoods of children – all of which pose serious threats to the protection of children’s rights. These challenges further jeopardize the already-tenuous achievement of the child-related Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. How UNICEF addresses these challenges will be pivotal to its role and positioning as a global advocate for children’s rights in the years to come. Central to this effort is the active engagement of children and youth, including adolescent girls and children with disabilities, in shaping a brighter future for themselves and the generations to come.

2. This evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 is framed within this context. It represents an accountability and learning commitment made to the Executive Board in the UNICEF plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025, endorsed in 2021.¹ Building on the insights from the 2022 evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 (E/ICEF/2023/3)² – a forward-looking assessment designed to help UNICEF management put in place the necessary core elements to support the achievement of the Strategic Plan’s objectives towards Agenda 2030 – this evaluation contributes a crucial step in the learning continuum that informs the strategic planning of UNICEF, from the design of the document and the process underlying its development through to implementation.

3. As the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 enters its final year and UNICEF proceeds to develop its next Strategic Plan, which will be presented to the Executive Board at its annual session of 2025, this evaluation offers an independent, impartial and timely assessment of the current Plan: its fitness for purpose and the extent to which its intended results have been achieved (or are likely to be achieved by the end of 2025), with a view to showcasing good practices and highlighting actionable lessons that should inform the design of the upcoming Strategic Plan. The scope of the evaluation encompasses the entire Strategic Plan period (2022–2025), with a specific focus on the time frame from 2022 to the end of 2024. This focus on the first three years of the four-year Plan represents a limitation, one known at the outset of the exercise, in order to ensure that UNICEF, the Executive Board and other partners would have in hand a credible analysis of what has worked well, what has worked less well, and why, in

¹ United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Compendium of decisions adopted by the Executive Board at its first regular session of 2022, E/ICEF/2022/8, pp. 3–4.

² Other key related assessments include the recently conducted *Global evaluation evidence synthesis* (2018–2022), which draws on evaluations at global, regional and country levels to provide valuable complementary insights. Additionally, recent and ongoing evaluations addressing enablers, change strategies and cross-cutting areas further enriched the evidence base, notably the recently completed evaluation of the UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans (covering 2018–2021 and 2022–2025). Evaluations of reform efforts and strategic planning across the broader United Nations system also provided relevant context and benchmarks for this evaluation.

time to provide relevant feedback and feed-forward at a critical time for the organization – and for children. To manage the limitations of an analysis delivered without a final year of evidence, the evaluation applied statistical techniques, including a linear regression-based forecasting model, to predict with some degree of certainty the likely progress of UNICEF by the end of 2025 on the key performance indicators outlined in the Strategic Plan.

4. Despite the evaluation’s broad scope, which covered three years and the entirety of the Strategic Plan across the whole organization, it was conducted in just five months, from June to November 2024. In this way, it represents a new generation of UNICEF evaluations that are carried out ever-more-rapidly and efficiently, yet without compromising rigour or credibility. The evaluation was independently managed by the Evaluation Office, in line with the United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards for Evaluation, and in strong collaboration with key internal and external stakeholders to ensure that its recommendations are integrated into the design of the new Strategic Plan.

5. The findings and conclusions presented in this summary are based on the best available evidence at the time of the analysis, and lead to actionable recommendations that highlight both technical adjustments and strategic shifts necessary for UNICEF to remain maximally relevant, effective and impactful through 2030. While some recommendations address incremental areas of improvement, others propose more transformational pivots to ensure that the organization continues to thrive as the foremost advocate for children’s rights at a critical juncture.

6. The primary intended users of the evaluation are the UNICEF Global Management Team, particularly the Office of the Executive Director, the Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, the Programme Group, the Private Fundraising and Partnerships Division, and the Public Partnerships Division. Additionally, all UNICEF personnel across headquarters, regional and country levels will benefit from the evaluation findings. Other key stakeholders include the UNICEF Executive Board, the Audit Advisory Committee, National Committees for UNICEF, Governments, donors, partners within and beyond the United Nations system, and the general public, including young people. The evaluation benefited from active, strong and positive engagement from all of these groups – including young people, in the form of a Youth Advisory Group established to ensure that the voices of young people figured prominently in the evaluation.

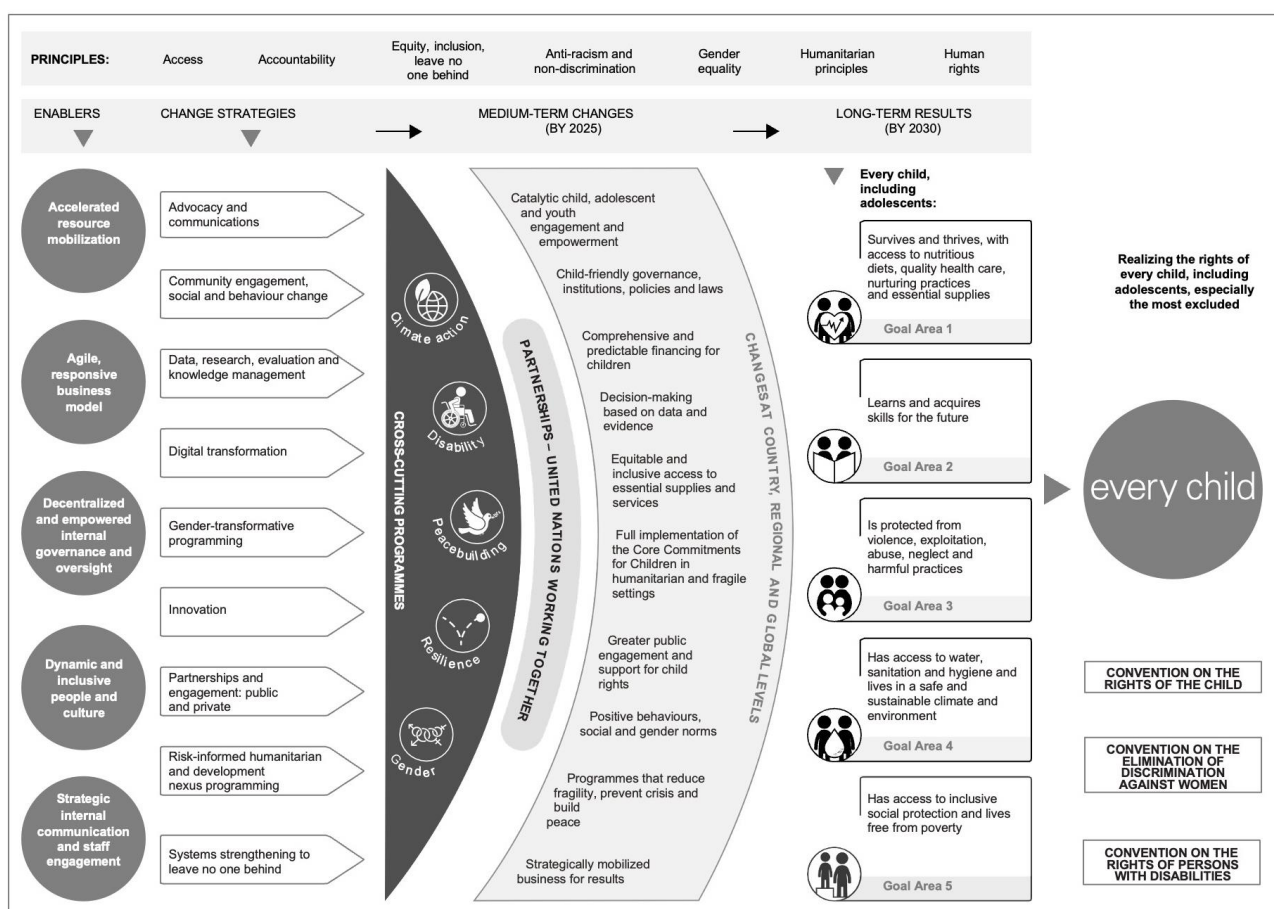
B. The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025

7. The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 serves as the pre-eminent framework guiding the organization’s vision for realizing the rights of every child and achieving maximum results at scale for children during the current quadrennium. Endorsed by the Executive Board in September 2021³ and launched in January 2022, the Plan aligns UNICEF with the United Nations development system’s collective efforts to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. Like its predecessor, the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021, it spans four years and serves as the first of two sequential Plans leading to 2030, providing a global road map for UNICEF country offices, and National Committees for UNICEF to promote the rights of all children worldwide. This sequential strategy was intended to ensure a targeted and adaptive approach to advancing the goals of the 2030 Agenda, responding to both the evolving state of children’s rights and the organization’s operating environment.

³ UNICEF, Compendium of decisions adopted by the Executive Board in 2021, [E/ICEF/2021/32](#), pp. 11–12.

8. The Plan identified five interconnected Goal Areas in which UNICEF aims to achieve long-term results by 2030; the Goal Areas comprise the “what” of the Strategic Plan – that is, what UNICEF, together with partners, aims to achieve during this four-year period. Spanning all of the Goal Areas, the Plan also emphasizes climate action, disability, peacebuilding, resilience and gender as some of its cross-cutting programmes to address key challenges and vulnerabilities. The Plan also includes five organizational enablers and nine change strategies, designed as “game-changing” levers to accelerate progress towards the Plan’s objectives, as reaffirmed by their integration into the Plan’s Integrated Results and Resources Framework.⁴ Together, the enablers and change strategies represent the “how” of the Plan – that is, how UNICEF aims to leverage all of the internal and external assets at its disposal to achieve the goals articulated in the Plan. Figure I visually summarizes both the medium- and long-term “what” and the “how” of the Plan in the form of a high-level theory of change, as well as the underlying principles shaping the work of the organization during this period.

Figure I
High-level theory of change of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025



Source: UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025: Renewed ambition towards 2030, UNICEF, 2022, p. 22.

9. In parallel to the overarching theory of change, more detailed theories of change specific to each Goal Area have been developed to explain how critical interventions will drive medium-term change at the country level and ultimately contribute to long-

⁴ UNICEF, Proposed revised Integrated Results and Resources Framework of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, [E/ICEF/2024/11/Add.1](#).

term results. These efforts align with the Sustainable Development Goals and the realization of children's rights. The Integrated Results and Resources Framework, underpinning the Strategic Plan and its theories of change, also outlines measurable targets and indicators for impact, outcome and output levels.

C. Evaluation rationale and scope

10. As noted above, this evaluation corresponds to an accountability and learning commitment included in the Executive Board-endorsed UNICEF plan for global evaluations, 2022–2025. Its overall purpose was to gain insights and reflect on the organization's achievements and challenges in implementing the Strategic Plan (2022–2025) and thus inform the next Strategic Plan, 2026–2029, based on an independent and impartial assessment of the evidence of what worked well, what worked less well, and why, and to draw lessons and recommendations to inform the way forward. To achieve this goal, the evaluation was guided by three key objectives, namely, to:

- (a) Assess the effectiveness of the Strategic Plan as a guiding framework for UNICEF and its activities across the organization;
- (b) Assess progress made for children under the Strategic Plan and forecast the likelihood of achieving its intended results by the end of the period; and
- (c) Examine the adaptability of the Plan and evaluate the relevance and utility of its core elements and framework in influencing its implementation and progress towards results.

11. To this end, the evaluation addressed the following main questions:

- (a) To what extent has the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, proven to be a coherent, relevant, and effective vision, framework, and roadmap for the entire organization?
- (b) To what extent have the intended results been achieved to date, and what is the likelihood of achieving them by end of the Strategic Plan period?
- (c) What internal and external factors, acting as barriers or opportunities, influenced the Strategic Plan implementation and progress towards achieving the results?

12. The scope of the evaluation covered the period of the Strategic Plan (2022–2025), with the data collected covering the period up to the time the evaluation was concluded, that is, from 2022 to the end of 2024, coupled with projections on the likelihood of the organization achieving its intended results by the end of 2025. Geographically, the evaluation was global in scope, covering all three levels of the organization across all countries in which UNICEF operates, as well as contributions from National Committees for UNICEF. While it did not include in-depth regional or country-level assessments, it utilized regional and country-level data to support aggregate global analysis, and it integrated the evidence of the global evaluation evidence synthesis and other strategic evaluations. Thematically, the evaluation encompassed all of the work of UNICEF under the Strategic Plan, including the “what” (Goal Areas) and the “how” (change strategies and enablers), with a focus on elements likely to significantly influence the next Strategic Plan.

II. Methodology

A. Evaluation approach and data collection

13. The evaluation employed the best and most appropriate quantitative and qualitative evidence available, and relied on a combination of techniques, such as a systems approach to analyse the focus of UNICEF on systemic change, a utilization-focused approach to provide useful and actionable recommendations for the next Strategic Plan, and a participatory approach involving diverse stakeholders, supported by advisory bodies such as a Youth Advisory Group. Cross-cutting issues, such as gender, disability, youth and child rights, were integrated as central themes throughout the process.

14. Alongside the broad scope of the evaluation, four thematic “deep dives” were conducted to explore systemic levers of change. The deep dives focused on data, climate change, innovative financing and systems change through the lens of social protection. To assess achievement of results, the evaluation used forecast modelling based on the statistical method of linear regression to assess progress at output and outcome levels towards the 2025 targets and to predict the likely future performance of UNICEF on key indicators.

15. Other key methods included:

- Document review: Over 200 internal and external documents analysed.
- Stakeholder interviews: 144 semi-structured interviews with internal and external stakeholders.
- Web-based surveys: Two separate instruments, one soliciting the perspectives and insights of country offices (93 per cent response rate) and another the perspectives and insights of National Committees for UNICEF (72 per cent response rate).

16. A broad range of stakeholders were consulted for the evaluation, including UNICEF senior management, country representatives, thematic experts, and external partners such as National Committees for UNICEF, Member States, funding partners, civil society organizations, other United Nations agencies, young people and global thought leaders.

17. Data were analysed using descriptive, content, quantitative and comparative analysis methods, as appropriate. Advanced computational (AI) tools were used to identify key themes across anonymized interview and survey data. Data from various sources were consistently triangulated to ensure reliability and credibility across all findings.

B. Limitations and mitigation measures

18. Several limitations shaped the evaluation. These included tight timelines that restricted the depth of cross-cutting issue analysis and limited the scope of deep dives and follow-ups. Projections of progress on key performance indicators were affected by data availability, with only two or three data points available for most indicators. Finally, as noted above, the need to undertake the evaluation in year three of a four-year plan in order to prove useful to the subsequent quadrennial planning process meant that the exercise was necessarily based on only three years of data. These challenges were partially mitigated through rigorous data analysis, creative data analysis techniques (e.g. regression-based forecasting), prioritization of key evaluation elements, and triangulation of data sources to ensure reliability and depth

of insights. Together, these measures supported the successful and timely completion of the evaluation within its constraints.

III. Findings

A. Quality of plan and process

19. **The Strategic Plan serves as a strong organizational guide at global and regional levels, providing a shared vision and consistent frameworks for planning and execution.** It helps headquarters and regional offices to align priorities with organizational goals, supporting standardization of programming quality across regions. The Plan integrates the “what” (Goal Areas) and the “how” (change strategies and enablers) of the organizational strategy of UNICEF, allowing both sectoral and life cycle-based programming models. This integration provides flexibility to address specific needs while maintaining alignment with overarching goals. The Plan has also proven useful for advocacy and external communication, aiding in donor discussions and positioning children’s priorities in United Nations planning frameworks. Despite some challenges in conveying its complexity, it has facilitated UNICEF leadership in areas like adolescent programming and human capital development within global cooperation frameworks, showcasing its value as a high-level strategic tool.

20. **At the country level, the Strategic Plan is widely used to set priorities, guide advocacy, and align programming with global goals.** Country offices report using the Plan’s results framework for planning, monitoring and reporting, while also leveraging it to engage stakeholders. It supports resource mobilization and aligns well with national sectoral structures in many contexts, particularly for offices working with Governments structured similarly to the Plan’s Goal Areas. This flexibility allows country offices to adapt its guidance to meet local needs while maintaining alignment with overarching organizational objectives, demonstrating its utility in varied contexts.

21. **Implementation of the Strategic Plan faces challenges at the country level, however, due to structural misalignments and resource constraints.** The Plan’s four-year cycle often clashes with the five-year cycles of country programmes, complicating long-term planning. Resource allocation gaps, particularly in smaller country offices, limit the ability to align local initiatives with the Plan’s global priorities. Additionally, global priorities sometimes compete with local needs, especially in crisis settings where national priorities and immediate challenges take precedence. This results in a gap between the Plan’s strategic intent and its practical application, reducing its impact in resource-constrained contexts.

22. **While the Plan provides flexibility for contextual adaptation, its design can create silos that hinder integrated programming.** Sectoral Goal Areas are effective for addressing specific needs but limit comprehensive approaches to complex challenges like early childhood development and climate action, which require cross-sectoral collaboration. For country offices that use alternative frameworks, such as life-cycle programming, the Goal Areas are less relevant. Staff have expressed a need for a more integrated approach that bridges sectoral divides, enabling holistic solutions that reflect the multifaceted nature of challenges faced by children and their communities.

23. **Cross-cutting programmes under the Strategic Plan show varying levels of success,** with more established areas like gender equality and early childhood development achieving stronger integration. These programmes benefit from existing frameworks, dedicated resources and organizational accountability. Newer areas, such as migration and urban programming, face greater challenges due to limited resources and insufficient institutional support. Successful integration requires not only clear

frameworks but also adequate capacity and resources to sustain implementation. Without this, cross-cutting programmes risk being deprioritized, especially in contexts where immediate local needs and resource constraints dominate decision-making processes.

24. The nine UNICEF change strategies show progress but vary widely in scope, support and transformative potential, with significant gaps in implementation and measurement. Systems strengthening is a key priority but often funds service delivery rather than driving systemic change. Advocacy and communications have expanded but face resource constraints, while data strategies improve Sustainable Development Goal indicator support but lack a unified framework, leaving tools like the multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS) underutilized. Digital transformation and innovation encounter infrastructure and cultural barriers, and gender-transformative programming advances slowly due to structural and funding limitations. Contextual variations, such as differing success in the humanitarian-development nexus across settings, further complicate implementation. Inconsistent measurement and resource disparities hinder the ability to assess collective impact, underscoring the need for stronger frameworks, sustained investment, and clearer accountability to fully leverage these strategies for systemic change.

25. UNICEF efforts to leverage financing and partnerships have demonstrated significant potential for systemic change, though many impactful initiatives remain outside the Strategic Plan's formal reporting framework. Strategies like the Innovative Financing for Children have achieved early successes reflected in the Vaccine Independence Initiative and UNICEF USA Bridge Fund, which have accelerated availability of essential health supplies, including vaccines. UNICEF support to public financing for children has strengthened public finance systems and increased social sector budget efficiency in numerous countries. Strategic partnerships with international finance institutions and United Nations agencies have further amplified impact, as seen in the advocacy-driven public finance reform in Montenegro. While these initiatives highlight the capacity of UNICEF to drive systemic change, their limited visibility in formal reporting underscores the need for better integration into the Strategic Plan to maximize their alignment with organizational goals.

26. Operationalization of the Plan is hampered by insufficient guidance, unclear priorities, and gaps in strategic support. Mechanisms for implementing systemic changes, such as humanitarian-development nexus programming, are underdeveloped, creating inefficiencies. Additionally, the lack of a costing framework prevents clear alignment of resources with strategic goals, weakening the ability to prioritize effectively. The absence of clear operational guidance for emerging areas like climate action or youth engagement further complicates implementation. While the Plan provides high-level direction, its practical application is constrained by these gaps, limiting its ability to deliver consistent results across diverse contexts.

27. In summary, the Strategic Plan excels as a high-level framework, offering coherence and guidance at the global and regional levels and allowing flexibility for local adaptation. However, its complexity, resource constraints and limited operational guidance pose significant challenges for country-level implementation. While it enables alignment with the overarching goals of UNICEF, its practical application is often hindered by competing priorities, inadequate resources and unclear mechanisms for integrated programming. The Plan's strengths in advocacy, programming guidance and thematic alignment are offset by weaknesses in resource allocation, prioritization and operational clarity, highlighting the need for refinements to enhance the Plan's impact across all organizational levels.

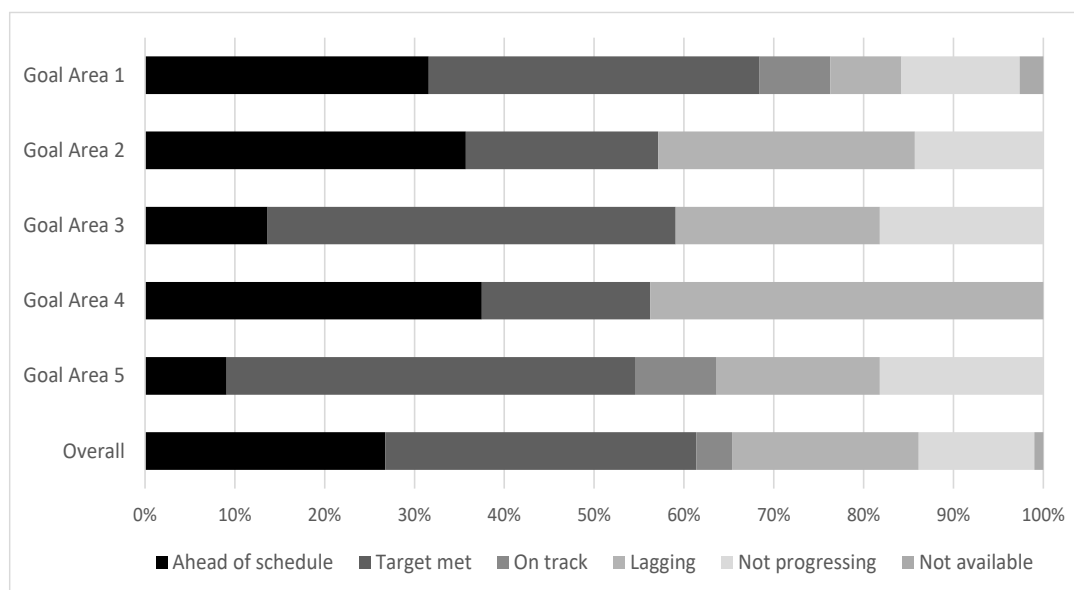
B. Progress to date and achievability of results by end of 2025

28. **Understanding progress in the UNICEF Strategic Plan requires a clear distinction between output and outcome indicators.** Output indicators measure immediate, short-term results, such as service delivery (for example, the number of children receiving learning materials through UNICEF-supported programmes) or systems strengthening activities (for example, the number of countries institutionalizing measures for children’s and adolescents’ participation and civic engagement). In contrast, outcome indicators assess longer-term and systemic changes, such as improvements in national literacy rates or reductions in dropout rates. Output indicators are generally self-reported by UNICEF offices, while outcome indicators rely on diverse external data sources.⁵

29. **The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 demonstrates strong progress at the output level,** with over 60 per cent of output indicators across all Goal Areas⁶ already meeting or exceeding their 2025 targets (see figure II below). Service delivery performance drives much of this success, supported by UNICEF extensive procurement and supply capacity. However, systems-strengthening outputs, critical for systemic change, lag behind service delivery in Goal Areas 2, 3 and 4. The shift towards leveraging programmes for larger-scale results is advancing, but progress remains uneven across Goal Areas due to varying capacities and challenges, such as donor preferences for short-term service delivery over longer-term system reforms.

Figure II

Output indicator progress towards 2025 targets by Goal Area



Source: Evaluation team analysis, based on UNICEF Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring data compilations.

⁵ Although some self-reported output indicators are also based on national data sources, such as District Health Information System 2.

⁶ Goal Area 1 (Every child survives and thrives) focuses on ensuring that all children have access to essential health services, adequate nutrition and early childhood development support, enabling them to reach their full potential. Goal Area 2 (Every child learns) ensures quality education and skill development for all children, preparing them for the future. Goal Area 3 (Every child is protected from violence and exploitation) addresses safeguarding children from harm, abuse and exploitation. Goal Area 4 (Every child lives in a safe and clean environment) ensures access to clean water, sanitation, hygiene and climate resilience to support children’s health and well-being. Goal Area 5 (Every child, including adolescents, has access to inclusive social protection and lives free from poverty) works towards reducing inequities by addressing poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, ensuring that the most marginalized children have opportunities to thrive.

30. **Outcome-level progress, however, is significantly off-track, with only 24 per cent of indicators projected to meet 2025 targets, reflecting gaps in systemic change and long-term results.** Challenges include short-term programming horizons, limited multisectoral collaboration, and government absorptive capacity for systemic approaches. In some cases, outcome indicators lack sufficient data, especially in Goal Areas 4 and 5, where irregular updates from external sources like MICS complicate measurement.

31. **Data and target-setting practices highlight the need for greater ambition and improved progress monitoring to drive systemic change.** More than one third of output indicators had reached their end of 2025 targets by the end of 2023, suggesting that some were set too conservatively and may not align with the scale of global priorities. Significant gaps in data, particularly for child-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators such as child poverty, hinder the ability to comprehensively assess progress and guide interventions. To address these issues, UNICEF is enhancing its data analytics capacity and leveraging new tools to strengthen the link between Strategic Plan monitoring, systemic change objectives and Sustainable Development Goals.

32. **UNICEF has made strides in improving its Strategic Plan monitoring through the Core Standard Indicators system, which enhances data quality and provides real-time automation via its dashboard.** However, the high number of indicators – 329 in 2023 – and the complexity of some data requirements create significant challenges, particularly for country offices managing tight reporting deadlines and resource constraints. While these improvements aim to streamline processes, the transactional burden on staff remains substantial, and complex indicators can hinder clear communication, especially with non-UNICEF audiences. Ongoing efforts to balance the quantity and complexity of indicators and standardize approaches across Goal Areas reflect a commitment to addressing these issues.

33. **The Strategic Plan's increased emphasis on systems strengthening is evident, with 47 per cent of Goal Area output indicators measuring results related to systems-strengthening programming, highlighting the shift by UNICEF towards sustainable, at-scale impacts for children.** While this is a positive development, the complexity of these indicators underscores the need for further capacity-building and alignment across regions and offices. Regional- and country-level innovations, such as tailored dashboards and MICS data, complement corporate monitoring but also reveal gaps in coherence and consistency. Challenges in MICS funding and mismatches between regional contexts and corporate frameworks emphasize the need for greater integration and support to fully leverage data for systemic change.

C. Factors influencing progress towards results

34. **The UNICEF Strategic Plan identifies five critical enablers of organizational performance: accelerated resource mobilization, dynamic and inclusive people and culture, an agile and responsive business model, strategic internal communication and staff engagement, and decentralized and empowered governance and decision-making.** While these enablers are strategically relevant and rated highly by country offices, their implementation has varied due to differences in strategic frameworks, resourcing, and adaptability to local contexts. Resource mobilization has shown strong progress, supported by a dedicated strategy and innovative financing mechanisms. Dynamic and inclusive organizational culture also demonstrated moderate success, despite lacking a cohesive implementation strategy across contexts. Other enablers, such as the agile

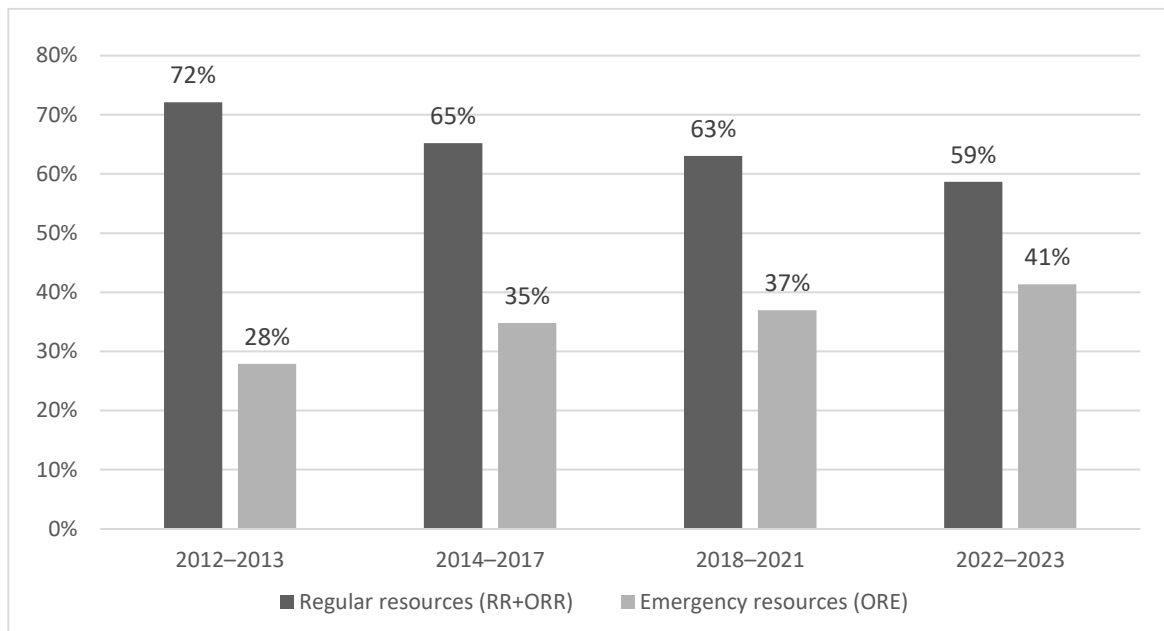
business model and strategic communication, faced fragmented execution, with limited corporate direction leading to uneven regional application.

35. Efforts to enhance UNICEF flexibility and inclusivity have achieved some success, but significant challenges remain. Gaps in expertise, rigid staffing structures and bureaucratic processes hinder operational efficiency. Barriers to cross-sectoral collaboration and uneven accountability persist, while cultural factors such as resistance to prioritization and siloed operations further impede progress. Promising initiatives, including the Business Model Review and Global Technical Teams, offer pathways to greater organizational agility and technical expertise-sharing. Adaptations, like the decentralized approach in Afghanistan, illustrate potential for better alignment with evolving needs and crises, though scaling such models requires sustained commitment and clear guidance.

36. The UNICEF funding structure both facilitates and constrains its ability to achieve the Strategic Plan objectives. While total income reached \$8.92 billion in 2023, 82 per cent of this income was earmarked, limiting flexibility in addressing emerging needs and investing strategically in underfunded areas. Core resources have declined to just 18 per cent of income, falling short of the 30 per cent target, constraining UNICEF capacity for long-term, systemic change. Humanitarian funding has grown, reflecting rising emergency needs but creating risks to balancing development goals (see figure III below). Thematic funding, which allows some programmatic flexibility, has stagnated, with a sharp drop in 2023 due to reduced Ukraine-related contributions.

Figure III

Trends in development and emergency expenditures across Strategic Plan periods, 2012–2023



Source: UNICEF inSight Strategic Plan Analysis Cube (RR: regular resources, unearmarked; ORR: other resources (regular), earmarked for specific purposes; ORE: other resources (emergency), earmarked for emergency response needs).

37. The organization has employed adaptive strategies and innovative financing mechanisms to address funding challenges. Multi-year funding commitments have seen modest growth, contributing to greater stability in protracted crises. Flexible country-specific thematic pools, which grew by 118 per cent in 2023, provide crucial adaptability for addressing programmatic needs, while innovative

tools like parametric insurance help mitigate risks from climate-related disasters. Additionally, the increased engagement of UNICEF with international financial institutions generated \$756 million in 2023. Nonetheless, sustained advocacy for more flexible funding, enhanced internal capacity for innovative financing, and careful alignment of donor priorities with long-term child rights goals will be essential to fully leverage these approaches.

38. Global external factors continue to shape and challenge the ability of UNICEF to achieve sustainable results for children, creating a complex and evolving context. Geopolitical instability, economic pressures, climate crises and rapid technological changes converge to form multilayered emergencies that disproportionately affect children. This “polycrisis” environment strains the capacity of UNICEF to balance immediate humanitarian response with long-term development goals. Rising child poverty, shifting donor preferences and shrinking civic space further hinder progress, while rapid technological advancements present both opportunities and risks. Addressing these interconnected trends requires adaptive strategies, innovative funding mechanisms, and advocacy for multi-year, core and thematic funding.

39. In response to these challenges, UNICEF is actively enhancing its operations to maintain relevance and agility. Efforts include integrating the humanitarian-development nexus into programming, strengthening partnerships with international financial institutions, and leveraging the global prioritization of climate action. Technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence, are being explored to improve efficiency, while advocacy for flexible funding and multilateral cooperation remains central. Strengthening local capacity and fostering intergovernmental collaboration are also essential for sustainable impact, alongside leveraging UNICEF leadership in global child rights frameworks through the United Nations development system and partnerships like the Green Climate Fund.

IV. Conclusions and the way forward

40. The conclusions serve as a critical bridge, synthesizing insights from the evaluation findings and elevating overarching themes that define UNICEF progress under the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. Overall, they underscore that, while the Strategic Plan presents a bold vision for systemic change, it also exposes critical gaps in implementation, accountability and operational coherence. Persistent challenges include achieving outcome-level results, balancing global priorities with local needs, and addressing cultural and financial constraints. By identifying key opportunities for change, the conclusions link these insights to actionable recommendations, offering a road map to strengthen the impact of UNICEF and guide future improvements.

41. A bold vision is in place, but implementation gaps remain. The Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 introduced an ambitious and relevant direction for systemic change, demonstrating UNICEF adaptability while revealing opportunities to strengthen implementation support structures. The Plan marks a significant evolution in the strategic thinking of UNICEF, emphasizing outcome-level and systemic change while introducing new features such as expanded cross-cutting programmes and a stronger focus on systems strengthening. Its comprehensive framework accommodates the broad mandate of UNICEF while maintaining organizational coherence – a notable achievement for an organization of the scale and complexity of UNICEF. However, the Plan’s complex architecture and overlapping elements create prioritization challenges. This suggests that future strategic frameworks could benefit from streamlined structures and a focus on building the necessary capacity to execute the Plan, while maintaining the current Plan’s ambitious vision for change.

42. Challenges persist in both measuring and achieving outcome-level results. UNICEF has shown strong performance in achieving immediate, output-level results for children but faces persistent obstacles in demonstrating progress towards outcome-level results, pointing to both measurement and implementation challenges. The organization's success in meeting or exceeding most output targets reflects its continued effectiveness in delivering direct results for children. This positive picture is tempered, however, by evidence of conservative target-setting and significant gaps in outcome-level target achievement across Goal Areas. Despite improvements, the organization's Results Framework and monitoring system continue to challenge country and regional offices in generating meaningful evidence to support decision-making and influence. The complexity of monitoring, with a large number of indicators for both development and humanitarian action, combined with tight reporting timelines, creates substantial transaction costs for country offices. These challenges are compounded by the short strategic planning cycle, which creates pressure to begin reviewing results before implementation is complete. Progress in refining monitoring tools and systems at headquarters and regional levels is evident, but greater emphasis on fostering innovations is needed to better align and complement efforts across different organizational levels.

43. Further efforts are needed to align the operational model of UNICEF with its strategic goals and address existing challenges. UNICEF continues to grapple with balancing the strengths of its decentralized structure and organizational culture against the need for coherent strategic direction and modernized operations, underscoring a critical imperative to transform its operational model. The decentralized structure of UNICEF and the organization's adaptability to diverse contexts are core strengths, enabling country offices to tailor global frameworks to local priorities while fostering inclusivity and strengthening accountability. However, the Strategic Plan often loses effectiveness at the country level, where contextual factors and resource constraints override strategic priorities. Cultural traits like consensus-driven decision-making and resistance to prioritization, along with staffing challenges such as expertise gaps, bureaucratic hiring processes and underutilization of national officers, hinder the organization's ability to address complex challenges like climate change and systems strengthening. To bridge the gap between strategic ambition and operational reality, UNICEF must balance decentralization with stronger coherence, accelerate human resource and cultural reforms, and ensure that its operational model supports both effectiveness and staff well-being.

44. The knowledge leadership of UNICEF can be more effectively harnessed to amplify its impact – and that of its partners – on improving children's lives. UNICEF maintains a unique and powerful position as a global knowledge leader on children. However, the organization's potential to broaden its influence through data, research and evaluation is constrained by internal limitations. As a primary source of data and evidence on children globally, UNICEF has demonstrated important successes in driving change through knowledge leadership. The organization's investments in data collection, research capabilities and evidence generation through evaluation have created valuable global public goods, and UNICEF has the potential to drive change through knowledge leadership. This potential is hindered, however, by organizational culture, capacity constraints and siloed operations. Building on its existing strengths, UNICEF has opportunities to increase its impact by giving greater prominence to data leveraging, state-of-the-art research, and evaluation. It also has an opportunity, with the relocation of the Data and Analytics team adjacent to the Innocenti Global Office of Research and Foresight, to offer robust foresight analysis and respond with agility to the increasingly complex global challenges.

45. **A constrained resourcing environment severely hampers the ability of UNICEF to achieve systemic change for children in both aspects of its dual mandate.** While successfully maintaining overall funding levels in a challenging environment, the increasing dominance of earmarked humanitarian funding, combined with declining core resources, creates fundamental challenges for the dual mandate of UNICEF. UNICEF has shown resilience in maintaining funding levels and innovation in developing new financing approaches, expanding partnerships with international financial institutions and pioneering new funding mechanisms. However, the rise in the scale and number of humanitarian crises has significantly increased humanitarian expenses relative to development expenses, raising concerns about the organization's ability to scale sustainable development solutions. With most contributions being earmarked and core resources declining, the ability of UNICEF to invest in long-term systemic change is severely constrained. This situation reflects broader challenges facing the whole United Nations development system but poses particular challenges for UNICEF given its dual mandate. This suggests the need to develop new funding approaches that better support both rapid humanitarian response and sustainable development results.

46. **The unique strengths of UNICEF are accompanied by significant strategic tensions that must be addressed.** UNICEF has demonstrated adaptability in crisis response, which positions it well to address emerging global challenges. The organization faces critical strategic tensions, however, as it navigates an increasingly complex global landscape. UNICEF has shown remarkable ability to respond to multiple simultaneous crises while maintaining focus on long-term development goals. The combination of the dual humanitarian and development mandate of UNICEF, its global reach and its technical expertise provide unique advantages in addressing complex challenges. However, the convergence of multiple global crises and related threats to child rights create new imperatives to evolve the strategic approach of UNICEF, as the organization must address fundamental tensions between competing demands. Key opportunities include more explicit treatment of existing strategic tensions, such as achieving results at scale while reaching the most marginalized populations; balancing the growing demands of humanitarian response with sustained investment in long-term development; and balancing global strategic coherence with local contextual adaptation. Additionally, greater integration of emerging priorities such as climate change and the refinement of the organization's operational model to better support both emergency response and systemic change will be essential for UNICEF to maximize its impact in an increasingly complex global landscape.

V. Recommendations

47. Based on its findings and conclusions, the evaluation makes seven recommendations that were developed and validated in close collaboration with key internal and external stakeholders. These are as follows:

48. **Recommendation 1: Child rights should provide a more explicit overall framing for the next UNICEF Strategic Plan and a non-negotiable framework for decision-making during its design and implementation.** The Convention on the Rights of the Child remains a foundational guide for the UNICEF child rights mandate, especially amid global crises impacting children's rights. Stakeholders emphasize a renewed urgency for UNICEF to visibly prioritize the rights agenda in its Strategic Plan. This includes explicitly integrating the Convention's principles, using them to support duty bearers in fulfilling obligations, and affirming children and youth as rights holders with a voice in all programming. The rights agenda must be clearly articulated, not assumed, to address pressing challenges and fulfil the UNICEF mandate effectively.

49. The Strategic Plan should ensure that each Goal Area explicitly focuses on the most discriminated-against children, positions them as rights holders, and integrates rights-based language alongside well-being aspects. It should emphasize that child rights underpin all change strategies and cross-cutting programmes, affirming that fulfilling these rights is the shared responsibility of all staff. The Plan must also recognize the importance of meaningful participation and engagement of children and youth as their right, embedding this principle in its development and throughout programming. Additionally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child should be more prominently highlighted in summary schematics to underscore the leadership of UNICEF in advancing an explicit child rights agenda (very high priority; will require human resources in terms of staff time and capacity).

50. **Recommendation 2: UNICEF should strengthen the transformative impact of the Strategic Plan by increasing stakeholder engagement in its design, scaling up integrated programming approaches, and adequately supporting cross-cutting programmes and change strategies.** The Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 aims for systemic, outcome-oriented change but faces challenges in achieving transformative impact. Insights from the evaluability assessment and formative evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 highlight the need for stronger multisectoral approaches and a focus on systems strengthening to fully realize children’s rights. Balancing the “how” of implementation – cross-cutting programmes, change strategies, and enablers – with Goal Areas is crucial for sustainable outcomes. Clearer definitions, metrics, strategic consolidation and adequate resources for cross-cutting elements and change strategies are essential. Enhancing accountability for transformative impact also requires deeper engagement with partners and youth during the Strategic Plan’s design phase.

51. UNICEF should engage diverse stakeholders, particularly youth, National Committees and civil society, to strengthen strategic planning and accountability processes. Efforts should focus to build on cross-sectoral and multisectoral programming approaches, supported by clear metrics to measure outcomes. Additionally, priority should be given to cross-cutting programmes and change strategies with broad integration and reach, alongside investments in transformative, rights-based strategies that have the potential to create significant organizational and programmatic impact (high priority; will require human resources in terms of staff time and financial resource re-allocations for investments in change strategies).

52. **Recommendation 3: UNICEF should identify a focused set of priorities in the Strategic Plan, clarify the resources required to achieve these priorities, and expand resource mobilization and innovative financing to increase overall funding for children and secure more flexible funding to support the Strategic Plan.** UNICEF has witnessed limited progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and faces deteriorating child rights protections within a resource-constrained environment, underscoring the urgent need for prioritization. Emphasis should be placed on global priorities likely to drive transformative impact for children, leveraging the comparative advantage of UNICEF and grounded in multisectoral approaches that promote equity and gender equality for marginalized children. However, the absence of a costed plan hinders both effective prioritization and advocacy for core funding. To address financial constraints, UNICEF must adopt innovative financing strategies, expand partnerships, and promote flexible funding mechanisms to sustain child-focused initiatives.

53. To accelerate and deepen systemic change in the current resource environment, UNICEF should focus on a small set of global priorities that foster multisectoral integration, with clear gender targets, such as eliminating child poverty and early childhood development. It is essential to cost these priorities to make a compelling

case for funding to Member States and demonstrate alignment with strategic goals. Proven private and public sector financing mechanisms should be scaled up to increase flexibility, ensure sustainability, and address the imbalance between humanitarian and development funding. Innovative financing must become a high organizational priority, leveraging new partnerships and instruments to mobilize resources beyond UNICEF direct funding streams while also securing funding for the organization itself. The Executive Board should be engaged to explore additional innovative financing opportunities, and robust risk management systems must be in place to address potential challenges (high priority; will require human resources in terms of staff time, and financial resources).

54. Recommendation 4: UNICEF should advocate for a longer United Nations system-wide strategic planning cycle while strengthening adaptive implementation approaches across diverse country contexts. The current UNICEF four-year planning cycle limits the organization's ability to achieve long-term systemic change. Planning and implementation frameworks lack flexibility for adapting to diverse country contexts while maintaining strategic coherence. The evaluation calls for differentiated implementation models supported by strong accountability mechanisms and evidence-informed reviews, balancing global alignment with local responsiveness through clear country typologies and adaptable approaches.

55. UNICEF should strengthen adaptive planning by advocating within the United Nations system for extended planning cycles, such as a five-year Strategic Plan extending to 2030, simplifying the results framework by reducing the number of indicators, and establishing a review process that allows for adaptations, which can include evidence-informed annual assessments alongside a midterm review framework to guide strategic decision-making and ensure alignment to global changes. Efforts to establish differentiated implementation models should focus on identifying country typologies – such as humanitarian, transitional, middle-income and high-income – that can inform programmatic strategies. Additionally, UNICEF should enhance accountability by developing metrics to measure implementation effectiveness across various contexts and by implementing balanced reporting mechanisms that maintain global coherence while enabling local relevance (very high priority; will require human resources in terms of staff time and financial resources to build staff capacity, strengthen systems and enhance feedback loops).

56. Recommendation 5: UNICEF should use the next Strategic Plan to embed the humanitarian-development-peace nexus as a fundamental component of its operating model, rather than treating it as a separate programming approach. UNICEF has made significant progress in integrating humanitarian, development and peace programming, as reflected in its Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. Key advancements include merging humanitarian and development efforts under Goal Areas, aligning monitoring indicators with the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, and raising the profile of the nexus approach. However, a persistent divide between humanitarian and development programming remains, driven by external donor funding structures and internal staff perceptions that limit the nexus to humanitarian crises and emergency teams. To fully leverage the potential of nexus integration, UNICEF must address these challenges, promoting a unified approach to child rights, humanitarian action, development, peacebuilding and resilience.

57. To strengthen the integration of humanitarian action into all components of the Strategic Plan, UNICEF should establish coherence between peacebuilding, resilience and nexus principles, including preparedness programming in development and fragile contexts, to reinforce interconnectedness and avoid siloed approaches. Treating the nexus as a core operating principle is essential, requiring dedicated

capacity at headquarters and regional levels, along with targeted training and learning for staff at all levels to bridge humanitarian and development efforts effectively. Additionally, a clear and accountable framework for humanitarian action is needed, with measurable results to make humanitarian action “everyone’s business”, which could include an enabler addressing leadership accountability to nexus principles in all contexts (very high priority; will require human resources in terms of staff time and financial resources to enhance staff capacities).

58. Recommendation 6: The next Strategic Plan should position climate action as central to the UNICEF mandate and operations, supported by appropriate partnerships, organizational structures and resources. Climate change amplifies risks for children, exacerbating vulnerabilities and threatening their rights and well-being. Although the Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 highlights climate as a cross-cutting theme and a result area within Goal Area 4, this positioning limits its strategic prominence and comprehensive integration. The accreditation of UNICEF by the Green Climate Fund and growing awareness of the impact of climate change on children present opportunities to enhance its leadership in climate action. However, to capitalize on these opportunities, UNICEF must clearly define its comparative advantage to avoid duplication in a competitive landscape.

59. To advance climate action, UNICEF should position it either as a stand-alone goal or an overarching priority while clarifying its comparative advantage. Strengthening capacity on climate programming for children is critical and involves expanding partnerships with climate-focused organizations, deploying dedicated climate specialists in regional and country offices, and adjusting to the growing humanitarian needs and climate-driven crises. Leveraging the accreditation by the Green Climate Fund and other climate finance opportunities is essential to secure funding for child-focused climate initiatives (high priority; will require human resources in terms of staff time and financial resources to enhance staff capacities).

60. Recommendation 7: The next Strategic Plan should position UNICEF data, research, evaluation and knowledge assets as strategic drivers of change, supported by strengthened organizational capacity to generate insights and influence. UNICEF holds unique potential as a global leader in data on children, essential for driving change and exemplifying data-driven decision-making. Despite generating extensive data, including through MICS, the organization has not fully leveraged this resource for strategic influence. Reducing child poverty, a central pillar of the UNICEF mandate, requires sustained investment in improving data on disparities. However, internal challenges such as organizational culture, capacity constraints and siloed operations hinder the transformation of data into actionable insights and scalable solutions. Strengthening this capacity is vital for evidence-based advocacy to advance child-focused Sustainable Development Goals.

61. UNICEF should strategically enhance its use of data by reaching organizational consensus on its role and positioning regarding MICS and other knowledge assets, even in the absence of centralized funding, while maximizing the utility of these assets and building on successful data-informed programming. A formalized partnership with the World Bank Commission on Global Poverty and the United States Agency for International Development, which oversees the Demographic and Health Surveys Program, could enable better geographic identification of child poverty and further leverage MICS. Organizational capacity in this area should be strengthened by enhancing data science and analytics capabilities, particularly in regional and country offices, while creating mechanisms to leverage local expertise. Additionally, fostering evidence-based decision-making and knowledge sharing requires robust incentives and accountability mechanisms. Internally, UNICEF should promote coherence and effectiveness through joint work agreements between its data,

evaluation and research functions, using their expertise to guide progress, refine strategies and address gaps in the child rights agenda (high priority; will require human resources in terms of staff time and financial investments in expanding staff capacity and funding as part of a data partnership).

VI. Draft decision

The Executive Board

1. *Takes note* of the evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025, its summary ([E/ICEF/2025/3](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2025/4](#));
2. *Also takes note* of the evaluation of the UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plans, its summary ([E/ICEF/2025/5](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2025/6](#)).

Annex

Evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025

1. Due to space limitations, the evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025 is not contained within the present annex.
 2. The report is available on the UNICEF Evaluation Office website:
<https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/documents/evaluation-unicef-strategic-plan-2022-2025>.
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