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Update on UNICEF efforts to address racism and racial discrimination

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Executive Board decision 2024/10, which in paragraph 7 “*further requests* UNICEF to implement all outstanding recommendations from the 2021 report of the internal Task Team on Anti-Racism and Discrimination, and to report on implementation in the next annual update to the Executive Board”. In paragraph 15 of that same decision, the Executive Board “*also requests* the management of UNICEF to present an update on its efforts to implement all of the recommendations from the note [Joint Inspection Unit note titled Review of measures and mechanisms for addressing racism and racial discrimination in United Nations system organizations: managing for achieving operational effectiveness (JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1)] at the annual session of 2025”.

This report provides an update on the ongoing efforts of UNICEF to address racism and racial discrimination.

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

* E/ICEF/2025/11/Rev.1.



I. Overview

1. The present report provides an update on efforts by UNICEF to address racism and racial discrimination within the organization. UNICEF strives to adopt a comprehensive approach to address all forms of discrimination and has regularly updated the Executive Board on organizational culture and diversity, the last time being at the annual session of 2024 ([E/ICEF/2024/15](#)), which reflected on the progress achieved since June 2019.

2. Considering that the UNICEF report on the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit ([E/ICEF/2024/13](#)), in its annex I, provided an update on the progress on anti-racism initiatives during the Executive Board annual session of 2024, and that an update on timelines was provided at the Executive Board first regular session of 2025 ([E/ICEF/2025/8](#)), the present report is an opportunity to provide more information on the initiatives implemented and existing challenges on the issues of racism and racial discrimination. The present report also complements the update on organizational culture and diversity being presented at the annual session of 2025 ([E/ICEF/2025/17](#)).

II. Background and progress on anti-racism and anti-discrimination initiatives

3. UNICEF recognizes the need to address racism and discrimination within the organization. The Executive Director commissioned an internal Task Team on Anti-Racism and Discrimination (Task Team) in June 2020 to analyse and propose actions addressing these issues. The decision to commission an internal working group aligns with academic research and evidence showing that task forces enhance accountability through senior leader engagement and provide colleagues with internal knowledge of structures, policies and practices.

4. In addition to the internal reflection among personnel, UNICEF maintained an open channel of collaboration with other United Nations organizations, which are facing similar challenges irrespective of their different mandates, size and presence in humanitarian and development contexts.

5. Several initiatives were implemented while the Task Team conducted its work to engage with and collect feedback from a wide range of colleagues from all UNICEF regions and offices. The Task Team supported learning and encouraged discussions about racism and discrimination. A digital engagement group was established for real-time conversations and learning. Multiple focus group discussions were held with various affinity groups and key headquarters partners to engage in meaningful dialogue. UNICEF also launched a Global Month of Dialogue in November 2020, addressing topics covering various forms of discrimination. These initiatives aimed to foster an inclusive and equitable work environment at UNICEF by promoting awareness, understanding, and actionable steps to combat racism and discrimination.

6. The report on Recommendations for Action on Anti-Racism and Discrimination of the internal Task Team on Anti-Racism and Discrimination was submitted to the Executive Director in May 2021 and contained a total of 87 recommendations for action, distributed among eight categories: 7 per cent related to awareness-raising; 15 per cent to capacity-building; 15 per cent to accountability and protection; 10 per cent to external communications, fundraising and brand; 30 per cent to recruitment and career development; 7 per cent to data and monitoring; 13 per cent to programme, supply and procurement; and 3 per cent to actions to be discussed at the United Nations system level. In September 2021, UNICEF finalized a response to the recommendations, which entailed extensive consultations with different divisions and

offices to assess the feasibility of proposals from a business and legal perspective, and the possible resource implications.

7. Significant progress has been made in the area of awareness-raising. Content to challenge bias and discrimination has been developed and shared internally with the entire workforce, with a glossary of key terminology and practical tools disseminated to all UNICEF offices. Conversations on anti-racism and discrimination were initiated in most regions via regional and country offices, at times supported by external local experts. Standards of conduct have been clarified with the launch of an interactive Spectrum of Behaviours tool, which elaborates on behaviours that are acceptable or not, inviting readers for reflection and directing them to resources on how to best ensure that their actions align with UNICEF policies. Efforts to identify and address cultural barriers to reporting are ongoing, with research conducted on speaking up against bias. Plans are in place to increase awareness of anti-racism and discrimination, and the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes has also been addressing these issues in its work and reporting.

8. Content on anti-racism and discrimination has been incorporated into different materials, such as the Managing People with Purpose programme, intended to reach about 6,500 people managers throughout the organization. Behavioural change initiatives have been implemented, focusing on inclusive conversations to be introduced by stakeholders. In May 2024, training sessions provided by the Anti-Racism Office in the United Nations Secretariat were attended by representatives of the UNICEF Office of Internal Audit and Investigations on the topic of investigations and by UNICEF staff counsellors on the topic of mental health support.

9. Regarding accountability and protection, a review of the UNICEF Policy on Whistle-Blower Protection against Retaliation is under way, considering the feedback received through the Task Team and the provisions of the Secretary-General's bulletin on protection against retaliation for reporting misconduct and for cooperating with duly authorized audits or investigations ([ST/SGB/2017/2/Rev.1](#)). As noted in the Report of the Secretary-General: addressing racism and promoting dignity for all in the United Nations Secretariat ([A/76/771](#)) while discrimination on the grounds of race is considered prohibited conduct, the United Nations norms do not define "racism" or specifically indicate how such behaviour may manifest itself in the workplace. In December 2024, UNICEF provided feedback on the proposed updates to the Secretary-General's bulletin on addressing discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority ([ST/SGB/2019/8](#)), which included definitions of racism and racial discrimination. While recognizing the importance of the issue, the feedback from UNICEF highlighted potential issues around singling out one specific characteristic that instils discrimination instead of taking an all-encompassing approach that condemns all forms of discrimination.

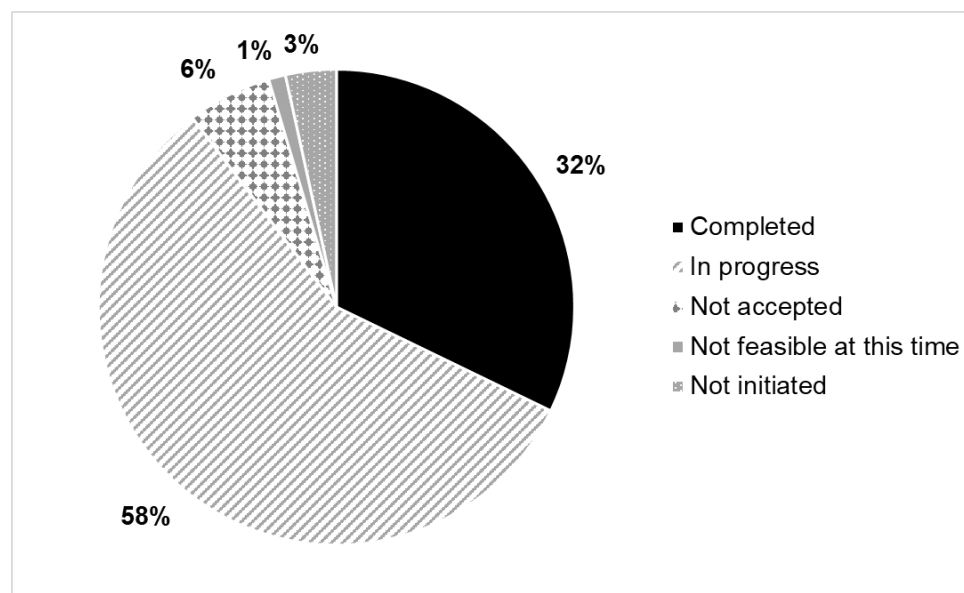
10. Data and monitoring efforts by UNICEF include developing identity categories and surveying personnel, with race and ethnicity groupings first included in the 2022 Global Staff Survey. Such groupings were inspired by a World Bank initiative to collect data and were also shared with the Joint Inspection Unit during its review of measures and mechanisms for addressing racism and racial discrimination. The data from the 2022 and 2024 Global Staff Surveys are disaggregated by racial groups and shared in a dashboard for analysis at the global and regional levels, respecting a confidentiality threshold of a minimum 10 participants to disclose the data. When it comes to internal justice systems, the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations collects data on reports of racist behaviour together with other grounds of discrimination and regularly reports on this in its annual report to the Executive Board.

11. An important requirement pending to assess the effectiveness of anti-discrimination measures is a self-identification (self-ID) initiative, which consists of the voluntary and safe disclosure of personal information (i.e. one's race or ethnicity, disability status, sex, etc.) by employees to their employer through a safe digital system with limited access and strict use. This process helps organizations understand how people from different groups are represented in the workforce, and how they may avail of opportunities in career progression, retention and professional development, and is aligned with recommendation 1 from the note of the Joint Inspection Unit titled Review of measures and mechanisms for addressing racism and racial discrimination in United Nations system organizations: managing for achieving organizational effectiveness ([JIU/NOTE/2022/1/Rev.1](#)). As of now, UNICEF relies on anonymous surveys to collect data on characteristics such as race and disability, which is not enough to learn how, for instance, people from specific racial groups are advancing in their careers based on actual records in human resources systems, instead of self-reported perceptions on their career advancement. UNICEF is currently assessing alternatives for a safe digital platform.

12. In terms of external communications, fundraising, and brand, supporting guidance on anti-racist communications has been created, with various tools and products developed. In the handling of partners, progress has been made in including reference to the respectful use of imagery and clear commitments to dignified engagement in templates for programme cooperation agreements. Under programme, supply and procurement, the initiatives included reviewing global spending data, monitoring competitive and efficient local and South-South procurement, and engaging donors more directly in such initiatives. Finally, in recruitment and career development, the organization is reforming recruitment systems to improve fair career progression for all, in line with article 101 of the United Nations Charter, as the paramount consideration remains to meet the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity.

13. As at 31 December 2024, 32 per cent of the recommendations made by the Task Team had been completed, 58 per cent were in progress, 3 per cent had not been initiated, 6 per cent were not accepted and 1 per cent were not feasible at the time.

Figure I
Status of the implementation of recommendations by the internal Task Team on Anti-Racism and Discrimination, as at 31 December 2024



14. At the inter-agency level, UNICEF was a founding member, together with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, of an informal inter-agency group working on anti-racism, which initiated regular meetings in mid-2020. As the group evolved and gained more members, common initiatives have focused on three deliverables: a joint learning package on anti-racism, a roster of anti-racism experts (vetted and non-vetted), and a compilation of special measures to promote greater diversity in recruitment. Members are reviewing those deliverables so that they can be brought to the High-level Committee on Management of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB).

III. Update on the review of measures and mechanisms for addressing racism and racial discrimination in United Nations system organizations: managing for achieving organizational effectiveness

15. UNICEF participated in consultations regarding the production of the note by the Joint Inspection Unit between 2021 and 2022, including supporting sessions in the informal inter-agency group on anti-racism in February 2022. UNICEF co-chaired the working group on diversity, equity and inclusion under the High-level Committee on Management in 2022 and 2023, under which some of the review's recommendations could be actioned. These include the establishment of an accountability framework for addressing racism and racial discrimination and developing an integrated curriculum to improve awareness, learning and performance that responds to the needs of personnel of various functions, categories and levels to address all forms and configurations of racism and racial discrimination in the workplace. UNICEF continues to believe that all of the recommendations in the review would be best implemented using an intersectional approach.

16. The Joint Inspection Unit note proposed six recommendations, namely:

(a) **Recommendation 1:** The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should collaborate, in the framework of the CEB, to establish a common set of categories for voluntary self-identification by personnel by June 2024, for the purposes of monitoring, analysing, evaluating and reporting on progress and success in achieving the goals of equality, equity, diversity and inclusion in addressing racism and racial discrimination.

(b) **Recommendation 2:** The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should direct their respective training and learning units to develop and implement a high-impact and integrated curriculum to improve awareness, learning and performance that responds to the needs of personnel of various functions, categories and levels in order to address all forms and configurations of racism and racial discrimination in the workplace.

(c) **Recommendation 3:** The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not done so should provide sufficient resources to support the achievement of defined results for the implementation of action plans for addressing racism and racial discrimination.

(d) **Recommendation 4:** The executive heads of United Nations system organizations, as members of the CEB, should jointly develop and provide resources to a high-level, inter-agency standing mechanism intended to unite organizations, leverage their existing capacities and comparative added value to collaborate and work together to respond to both immediate and longer-term needs for addressing racism and racial discrimination across the United Nations system, and address the transformative changes needed to enhance the continued relevance and value of the various efforts at both the organizational and the system-wide levels.

(e) **Recommendation 5:** The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should establish, by 2024, an accountability framework that sets out the expected results, outcomes and key performance indicators for addressing racism and racial discrimination, and report periodically to their legislative organs and/or governing bodies on progress made in achieving the predefined results.

(f) **Recommendation 6:** The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should strengthen the equal distribution of opportunities in human resources management for all personnel.

17. Recommendations 2, 3 and 5 were accepted and implemented, and recommendation 6 was accepted and remains in progress. Recommendations 1 and 4 are outside the sole remit of UNICEF. Additional information on the latest progress is provided below.

18. UNICEF implemented recommendation 2, which was aligned with recommendations from the Task Team under capacity-building, taking a comprehensive approach to learning about non-discrimination and inclusive behaviours. UNICEF has developed a learning curriculum and e-module that encompasses all forms of discrimination, including racial discrimination, focusing on building respectful workplaces through a growth mindset to affect behaviour change.

19. Recommendation 3 was implemented in 2022 with the establishment of a dedicated team working on organizational culture.

20. Recommendation 5 was considered already implemented since 2021, given the recommendations for action by the Task Team. UNICEF has shared its action plan with other United Nations organizations.

21. Recommendation 6 was accepted and remains in progress, given previous commitments under the UNICEF OneHR Strategy 2022–2025 and the Human

Resources Delivery Model, which included anti-discrimination as a cross-cutting priority. The implementation of the “whole of diversity” approach throughout 2024 has clarified gaps in fair representation and the need for talent outreach based on existing workforce data. This recommendation remains in progress given the need to implement a self-ID initiative which would more systematically measure the distribution of career and development opportunities among different groups, including by racial group.

22. Recommendation 1 is outside the sole remit of the organization, and UNICEF has proposed a session to discuss the matter in the High-level Committee on Management of the CEB, associated with the Human Resources Network (established by [CEB/2022/3](#)). This will allow better coordination on proposals and alignment among organizations. In light of different emerging priorities and the current funding crisis across the development sector, a delay is expected in crafting this standard categorization, which is now expected by the end of 2025.

23. Similarly, recommendation 4 is outside the sole remit of the organization. UNICEF welcomes the call for more inter-agency coordination around anti-racism work and proposes that, in line with an intersectional approach to address all forms of discrimination, the existing networks in the High-level Committee on Management is adopted as the “high-level, inter-agency standing mechanism intended to unite organizations”, instead of creating a parallel structure, especially given funding constraints. Similarly, a delay is expected on this initiative, which is expected to be concluded by the end of 2025.
