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## United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

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Item 8 of the provisional agenda\*

### **Evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021**

#### **Summary\*\***

#### *Summary*

The present evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 is the first of its kind. Its primary purpose is to assess the use of the Strategic Plan as a tool for guiding UNICEF and for managing its activities; facilitate learning from UNICEF experience during the implementation period of the Strategic Plan (2018–2021); and provide actionable recommendations with respect to the organization's overall strategy and strategic planning process for the upcoming strategic planning cycle.

Overall, the evaluation found that the Strategic Plan was highly relevant and strongly aligned with the UNICEF mission, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals. It was appreciated by stakeholders for providing a holistic framework while permitting the flexibility required to align programmes at the country level with national priorities and children's rights. The change strategies of the Strategic Plan were considered a particularly important innovation. At the same time, challenges were observed in relation to multisectoral programming, strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus, monitoring and reporting, child participation and the distribution of resources, among other issues. The evaluation makes a series of recommendations in relation to these issues as well as for strengthening the UNICEF contributions to the United Nations development system reform agenda.

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

\* E/ICEF/2021/1.

\*\* 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).



## I. Introduction

1. The present evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 is the first of its kind, and was conducted in accordance with the provisions of the UNICEF evaluation policy and the norms and standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group. The primary purpose of the evaluation is to:

(a) Assess the use of the Strategic Plan as a tool for guiding UNICEF and for managing its activities;

(b) Facilitate learning from UNICEF experience during the Strategic Plan implementation period (2018–2021);

(c) Provide actionable recommendations with respect to the organization's overall strategy and strategic planning process for the upcoming strategic planning cycle.

2. The evaluation should not be read as an evaluation of UNICEF performance during the period 2018–2021. It does not attempt to link the Strategic Plan to specific results and, instead, attempts to assess its utility in guiding the organization over the four years of its duration.

3. The process was guided by an evaluation matrix, using a set of five key evaluation questions, namely:

(a) To what extent is the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 aligned with the UNICEF mission and the United Nations reform agenda, and to what extent does it contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals?

(b) To what extent is the Strategic Plan fit-for-purpose in a rapidly changing world?

(c) What are the lessons from the operationalization of the Strategic Plan?

(d) To what extent has the Strategic Plan contributed to fostering partnerships and new ways of working?

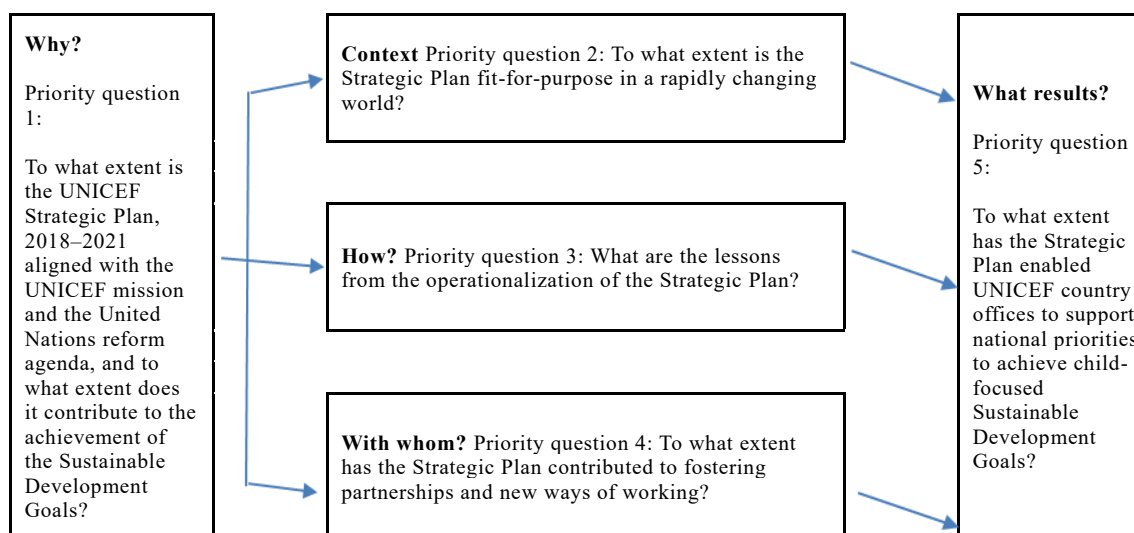
(e) To what extent has the Strategic Plan enabled UNICEF country offices to support national priorities to achieve child-focused Sustainable Development Goals?

4. The evaluation was conducted between July and October 2020 with the support of a team of six senior external evaluation consultants. A mixed-method approach was used, including quantitative and qualitative data analyses. This included a systematic and comprehensive review of more than 210 internal and external documents and over 100 interviews with internal stakeholders and external partners.

5. A set of 62 country programme documents (CPDs), from 2018 onwards, were selected for deeper analyses. Additionally, 10 country offices were selected for more in-depth analyses.

6. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted at the country, regional and headquarters levels and with external partners. The evaluation was also supported by an evaluation reference group composed of members from key headquarters divisions and selected regional offices. Consultations with the global evaluation committee were held in September 2020 to validate emerging findings and refine the evidence.

Figure I  
Logic of the evaluation questions



## II. Key findings

### A. To what extent is the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 aligned with the UNICEF mission and the United Nations reform agenda, and to what extent does it contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals?

#### Alignment with existing frameworks

7. The Strategic Plan was intended to be implemented as an overarching and strategic framework under which programme countries determine the direction and details of implementation. Decisions on programme priorities are based on national priorities, each country's situation analysis and the role of UNICEF within the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). The evaluation found that key stakeholders support the intention of the Strategic Plan to serve as a framework rather than a plan.

8. There is no doubt that, in principle, the Strategic Plan is in full alignment and compliance with the UNICEF mission as well as with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As assessed against the UNICEF mandate, other foundational documents and international agreements and accords, the Plan was found to be highly relevant. There is a high degree of correspondence between the Strategic Plan's core and forward-looking components and the Sustainable Development Goals.

9. In line with General Assembly resolution [71/243](#) on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (QCPR), the Strategic Plan includes a common chapter describing how UNICEF will work together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), emphasizing their joint commitment to support countries to achieve sustainable development. The present evaluation does not address the common chapter, since such an exercise would require a joint endeavour.

10. As the reform of the United Nations development system was rolled out concurrently with the implementation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, no formal linkages are expected between the two documents.

## **B. To what extent is the Strategic Plan fit-for-purpose in a rapidly changing world?**

### **1. Goal Areas**

11. The Strategic Plan Goal Areas were designed to be aligned with one or more of the child-focused Sustainable Development Goals. All Goal Areas were conceived to be interlinked, reflecting the integrated and cross-sectoral nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Evidence shows that the Strategic Plan is used as a powerful organizational narrative and a broad overarching framework.

12. The Goal Area structure of the Strategic Plan has allowed country offices the flexibility to align with national priorities supporting the acceleration of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly focusing on the most traditional UNICEF sectors, such as health, education and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). The country offices found that the structure of the Strategic Plan did not present constraints to planning in support of different national priorities. Evidence shows progress across all Goal Areas, with some showing more progress in specific result areas than others, as described in detail in the midterm review of the Plan.

#### **1.1 Leave no one behind**

13. The commitment of the 2030 Agenda to “leave no one behind” is reflected in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, particularly through its approach to gender-responsive programming, humanitarian action and results for children with disabilities. There has been progress in a number of countries in gathering the data required for effective programming to ensure that no child is left behind. In countries with relatively good disaggregated data, country offices and partners are able to identify and respond to the needs of children living in extremely poor households, children belonging to vulnerable groups and children at a disadvantage.

14. In countries with data limitations, this challenge is more acute. Evidence from a number of recent evaluations in humanitarian contexts consistently shows a lack of disaggregated data.

15. However, perhaps the biggest challenge relates to the trade-offs between reaching the most vulnerable and achieving results at scale — a finding consistent with the midterm review. Being efficient with donor funds implies reaching the greatest possible number of children. Reaching the most vulnerable, however, is often more resource-intensive. These objectives are inherently in tension, and achieving the right balance is challenging, particularly in the light of resource constraints. The dilemma is often particularly acute in humanitarian contexts.<sup>1</sup>

### **2. Cross-cutting priorities**

16. In addition to the five Goal Areas, the Strategic Plan includes two cross-cutting priorities, namely humanitarian action and gender equality. This was a key innovation of the Plan and was designed to encourage the organization to view humanitarian action and gender equality not as stand-alone areas, but as integral to UNICEF work across all sectors and in all contexts. Recent evaluations have shown significant improvements in both cross-cutting priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, Annual report on UNICEF humanitarian action, 2020.

## 2.1 Humanitarian action

17. Within the overall framework of the Strategic Plan, the organization's strategic and operational approach to humanitarian action is set out in its Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action. In all facets of programming in UNICEF, there are separate processes for development programming and humanitarian action, including in areas such as the programming process, funding and resource mobilization, and monitoring and reporting. Those structural issues are not all within the organization's control. However, such distinctions limit the influence of the Strategic Plan in UNICEF humanitarian action.

18. The evaluation found some evidence to suggest that incorporating humanitarian action as a cross-cutting priority has been beneficial to some country offices, particularly those dealing with protracted crises. The UNICEF humanitarian review<sup>2</sup> noted that the mainstreaming of humanitarian action in the Strategic Plan is difficult to apply at the country level because it requires context-specific adaptations and flexibility.

## 2.2 Gender equality

19. The UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2018–2021 was developed concurrently with the present Strategic Plan. The Gender Action Plan continues to follow the twin-track approach of improving UNICEF institutional capacity and integrating gender results in programmes, with specific efforts to empower adolescent girls. It is noted in the Strategic Plan that the Gender Action Plan articulates the main strategies through which Strategic Plan results related to gender will be achieved.

20. Evidence from the development effectiveness review report and the evaluation of the Gender Action Plan show important advances in UNICEF work on gender equality across various programme areas, particularly in priorities targeted by the Plan, and in operationalizing gender equality efforts. Evidence also shows a significant improvement in the percentage of evaluations reporting improvements towards gender equality, from 48 per cent in the 2016 report to 58 per cent in the most recent 2020 development effectiveness review report. Nevertheless, the evaluation of the Gender Action Plan also indicates that challenges to gender mainstreaming remain, including the limited comprehensive integration of gender equality within programmes, institutional capacity and systems.

21. Another key innovation of the Strategic Plan was the definition of “change strategies” addressing the ways in which UNICEF will achieve results for children. These include:

- (a) Programming for at-scale results for children;
- (b) Gender-responsive programming;
- (c) Winning support for the cause of children from decision makers and the wider public;
- (d) Developing and leveraging resources and partnerships for children;
- (e) Harnessing the power of business and markets for children;
- (f) United Nations working together;
- (g) Fostering innovations for children;

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<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, “Strengthening UNICEF’s humanitarian action: The humanitarian review: findings and recommendations” (2020). The evaluation of the humanitarian and development nexus will shed more light on how humanitarian action as a cross-cutting priority has contributed to improvements in humanitarian results.

(h) Harnessing the power of evidence as a driver of change for children.

22. Overall, evidence indicates that, particularly at the field level, the eight change strategies have provided useful guidance to country offices. The offices have reinforced strategies for building national capacity, strengthening systems, promoting community engagement, generating evidence for policy advocacy, and monitoring and reporting, among many others. Although it is difficult to attribute those achievements solely to the Strategic Plan, it is important to acknowledge that even when faced with challenges, country offices have been actively using the change strategies, even prior to their clear introduction in the current Strategic Plan, to quickly adapt to changes in support of the realization of all children's rights.

23. More evidence is needed to understand how specific change strategies directly improve the organization's agility in responding to new or emerging threats to children, including in such areas as climate change and mental health.

24. Also noted was the imbalance in emphasis in the Strategic Plan between the Goal Areas (the "what") and the change strategies and enablers (the "how"). Given the relatively good understanding of programme approaches, it may be the case that a strategic plan that gives more emphasis to change strategies and efforts to ensure the organization has the right capacities will be more likely to lead to the agility the organization seeks.

## **C. What are the lessons learned from the operationalization of the Strategic Plan?**

### **1. Country programmes**

25. Senior management at the country-office level consistently indicated that the Strategic Plan was a good framework for preparing their CPDs, which allowed the organization to identify priorities globally but gave sufficient space for the offices to align national priorities to the country-relevant Sustainable Development Goals, in coordination with United Nations country teams. Those views were also reflected in the analysis of CPDs.

26. The evaluation found that country offices varied their use of the Strategic Plan to guide their programming, partly due to differing timing cycles. Country offices with off-cycle CPDs, that is, those approved during the second half of the strategic plan cycle, commonly aligned their existing programme and indicator-reporting strategy with the existing Strategic Plan, or in the spirit of the upcoming Plan, rather than using the Strategic Plan as a tool to design their programme.

27. When it comes to accelerating results towards the Sustainable Development Goals, half of the countries in the sample explicitly detailed at least some of the Goals their programmes would address. The other half of the sample mentioned an overall alignment of the CPD with the Goals.

### **2. Humanitarian action**

28. It is difficult to conclude that the Strategic Plan had either a positive or negative effect on humanitarian fundraising. Despite its recent increase, funding continues to fall short of needs, and the type of humanitarian funding continues to be problematic, with conditional and short-term funding constraining UNICEF humanitarian action.

29. Leadership in humanitarian contexts was identified by the humanitarian review as a significant limitation to the organization's humanitarian response. In addition,

earlier evaluation evidence<sup>3</sup> suggested that limited understanding by UNICEF staff of humanitarian principles had, on occasion, led to compromises on some of those principles. Clearly, if UNICEF is to fulfil the objectives for humanitarian action set out in the Strategic Plan, it will need to support greater internal capacity.

30. The Strategic Plan emphasizes the use of risk-informed programming as a key approach to enhancing the link between humanitarian and development programming. The data companion and scorecard to the annual report for 2019 of the Executive Director of UNICEF notes that 37 per cent of country offices met organizational benchmarks on implementing risk-informed programming in 2018, and 41 per cent in 2019.

31. Despite important advances in risk-informed programming, a more comprehensive contextual view is critical to improve the risk analyses. A recent review of the UNICEF humanitarian response in Venezuela noted the need to include analysis related to the political and economic context in the risk analysis for decision-making. The review indicated that the humanitarian response in Venezuela was partially delayed because of this omission. Views from the field reinforced that conclusion. Given the complexity of such situations, a holistic whole-of-organization approach is needed, which includes the necessary technical capacity to comprehend the complexity and scale of the contexts.

### **3. Gender equality**

32. The trend analysis included in the development effectiveness review report presents the progress made towards including gender in programming. According to a composite measure of gender integration, 83 country offices out of 128 met the organizational standard in 2019.<sup>4</sup> More recent evidence from the data companion and scorecard to the annual reports for 2018 and 2019 of the Executive Director of UNICEF shows good progress in all programme results that have integrated gender.

33. The evaluation of the Gender Action Plan also found that, at the country level, programmatic approaches in the priority areas and the integrated programming areas of the Plan had generally improved.<sup>5</sup> Additional progress was reported in the percentage of country offices undertaking gender programmatic reviews. There was, however, less progress in integrating gender equality into CPDs and the programme strategy notes of countries with humanitarian situations. The evaluation found that humanitarian action lacked a focus on gender equality beyond the equal participation of women and men in programming.

### **4. Resource mobilization and expenses**

34. While total income for UNICEF rose by 6 per cent in 2019 when compared with the first year of the Strategic Plan, regular income fell by almost 4 per cent. The decrease has important implications for UNICEF and the operationalization of the Plan because regular resources are not earmarked and thus able to be allocated internally.

35. The decline in regular resources is even more noteworthy when compared to planned levels of income. The original financial framework for the Strategic Plan

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<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies, 2018.

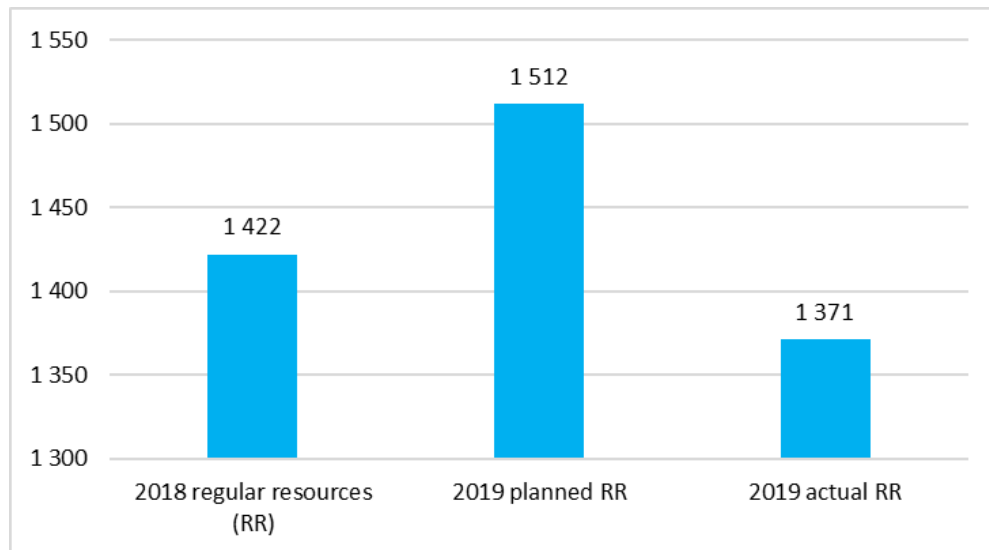
<sup>4</sup> The composite measure includes institutional accountability benchmarks that track gender analysis, and the integration of gender priority results, monitoring, resourcing, capacity and accountability.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, Evaluation of the UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2020.

planned for \$1,512 million in regular resources in 2019. However, actual regular resources fell short of the planned amount by \$141 million.

Figure II

**Actual regular resources available in 2019 compared to planned**



Source: UNICEF, UNICEF Strategic Plan: updated financial estimates, 2020–2023, 2020.

36. The majority of the shortfall was in regular resources from private sector sources. The significant shortfall in actual versus planned regular resources available to UNICEF represents a real challenge to operationalizing the Strategic Plan.

37. Nevertheless, existing funding tools are in place, involving significant coordination with other United Nations agencies, which could be utilized to advocate for greater funding directed to regular resources. The structured funding dialogue provides one such avenue to encourage Member States to bring core resources for multisectoral and multiagency joint work to the agreed target of 30 per cent by 2023. Similarly, important commitments to improve the quality of humanitarian funding are reflected in the Grand Bargain.<sup>6</sup>

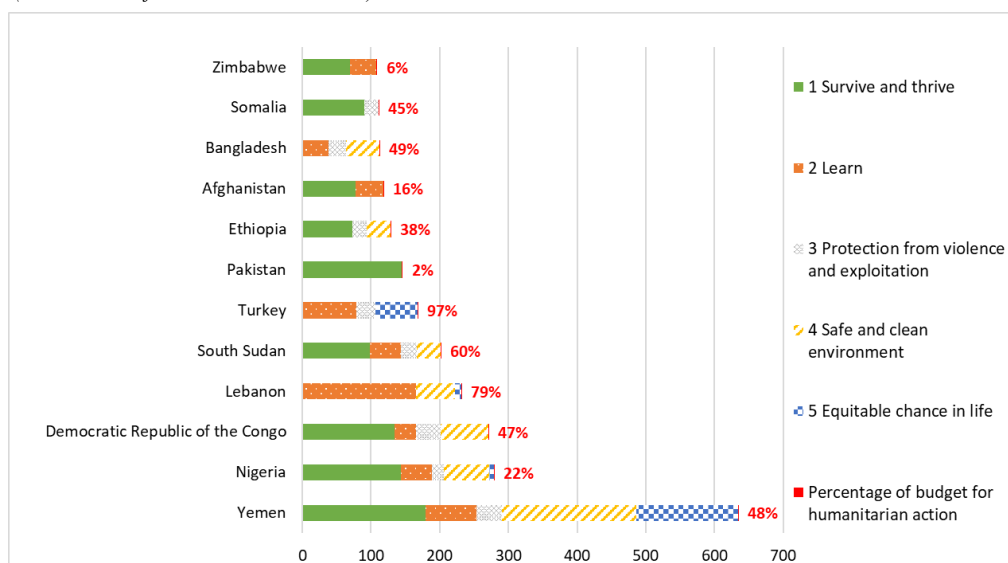
38. Well-tailored advocacy narratives supported by evidence-based reports to answer each donor's specific requirements and those of their constituencies are necessary to inform, engage and gain the support of the organization's diverse set of donors.

39. Overall, the distribution of expenses by category of resources and across regional offices has remained relatively constant over the past three years. The allocation of resources across country offices, meanwhile, has been consistently concentrated on a small number of countries. In 2019, for example, a small number of country offices spent over \$100 million (per country office). Of those, five (the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen) accounted for a total of \$1.6 billion in expenses (see figure III).

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF, Implementation of UNICEF procedure on linking humanitarian action and development programming, 2020.



Figure III  
**UNICEF expenses in countries in excess of \$100 million, 2019**  
*(In millions of United States dollars)*



Source: UNICEF, InSight.

40. Further analyses of the five top-spending countries and other randomly selected countries examined the relationship between expenses at the country level and development needs. Evidence indicates that expenses were not well correlated with country needs. That finding is consistent with information from country offices suggesting that expenses in the specific programme areas identified in their CPDs were largely dependent upon resources mobilized at the country-office level, through specific agreements with donors; in other words, expenses were more opportunistic than strategic.

## 5. Change strategies

### 5.1 Programming at scale

41. Interviews suggest that country offices embrace the idea of multisectoral programming in principle. In practice, however, the offices feel that UNICEF still functions in silos. Despite improvements compared to its predecessor, the Strategic Plan is still perceived as not fully multisectoral. The vertical allocation of resources through the Plan provides certain sectors with targeted funding, leading many country offices to focus on those sectors. The vertical structure of the Programme Division also affects efforts to promote multisectoral work, as there is no clarity on accountability for multisectoral programming results.

42. Member States have recognized the multisectoral nature of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, greater support to appropriately link funding sources to multisectoral programming is critical. In humanitarian action, in particular, there is continued donor hesitation to translate their commitment to support multisectoral efforts into the kind of funding that would enable such linkages.

43. Despite efforts to strengthen the humanitarian-development nexus in recent years, there is still room for UNICEF to develop a more coherent approach in the field. Evidence from the humanitarian review highlighted that the organization plans humanitarian and development programming separately, using different processes and schedules. Staff are separated into development and humanitarian professionals in programmatic silos, and there are limited links. Not enough is invested in using pre-

disaster development to enhance emergency response or make development gains from humanitarian action. Despite the organization's new procedure on linking humanitarian and development programming, there is a lack of clarity on implementation.

44. According to the 2020 midterm review of the Strategic Plan, despite a significant increase from the baseline of 16 per cent in 2017, only 31 per cent of country offices routinely engage children in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes. While the 2019 target of 30 per cent has been achieved, this modest figure is cause for concern, given the organization's target of 60 per cent by 2021. As the primary global advocate for children's rights, UNICEF should be at the forefront of promoting child participation and ensuring that the voices of children are heard.

## **5.2 Gender-responsive programming**

45. Recent evidence from the data companion and scorecard for 2019<sup>7</sup> shows progress in gender-responsive UNICEF programming at the country level. The evaluation of the Gender Action Plan supports those findings. The improvements can be directly attributed to the Strategic Plan and the supporting programmatic guidance from the Gender Action Plan, particularly in the five targeted priorities. However, efforts to support gender mainstreaming across the organization remain limited, and more needs to be done to align organizational priorities with current gender realities on the ground. In addition, it is necessary to take a proactive approach to support the United Nations country team in countries where UNICEF has a stronger presence and greater capacity compared to other United Nations agencies.

## **5.3 Winning support for the cause**

46. Evidence with regard to staff capacities indicates the increased importance of engaging with children and adolescents as change agents. Ongoing efforts to strengthen staff capacity to engage young people and their communities in ways that are respectful of local cultures, while ensuring the meaningful and safe participation of vulnerable groups, are key.<sup>8</sup>

## **5.4 Developing and leveraging resources and partnerships for children**

47. As noted in the midterm review,<sup>9</sup> UNICEF has been quite successful in the implementation of this change strategy. Evidence suggests that the Strategic Plan was, overall, a helpful framework for guiding UNICEF in leveraging resources for the Plan's five Goal Areas. However, the Plan was not as helpful in enabling resource mobilization for newer global initiatives, such as climate change or adolescent mental health.

48. Some concerns were voiced that senior leadership was focusing greater resources on reaching out to corporate partners, at the expense of outreach efforts to individual UNICEF donors.

## **5.5 Harnessing the power of business and markets for children**

49. Evidence shows that the Strategic Plan and its results framework have been robust platforms for partnering with the private sector. There was wide consensus that the recently-launched Business for Results initiative is showing encouraging results.<sup>10</sup> Although it will take time to see results, implementing Business for Results is an

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<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, Report on the midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 and annual report for 2019 of the Executive Director of UNICEF.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, para. 17, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, para. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews suggest that the Business for Results workshops have been well received.

important organizational transformation that will require a cultural shift, the creation of systems and staff capacity-building — all three of which are time-intensive. Expected results, targets and indicators in the results framework of the next strategic plan must reflect this shift.

50. Evidence indicates that country offices will need guidance on creating shared value. There will also be merit in reflecting on the type of indicators required to hold businesses accountable for respecting the various principles that underpin the UNICEF rights-based approach to development.

## **5.6 United Nations working together**

51. UNICEF has engaged significantly with other United Nations agencies under the current Strategic Plan. The 2020 UNICEF report on the implementation of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system indicates that the organization has demonstrated a strong capacity to engage in and support partnerships within the United Nations. Nevertheless, there is significant concern, particularly from field offices, regarding the need to protect and promote the UNICEF mission as the children's organization. Results from a recently conducted country office survey support those views, indicating that the engagement on normative issues (for example, the child rights agenda) with other United Nations country team members is an area that needs to be further explored.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, country offices highlighted the need to better use UNICEF comparative advantages in support of the United Nations development system reform process.

## **5.7 Fostering innovation for children**

52. Despite recent innovations in programming approaches and the use of new technology for development, and general acknowledgement of their importance in supporting the achievement of the 2030 Agenda as well as their high rank on the UNICEF Executive Director's agenda, evidence indicates that views are still mixed on how effective the Strategic Plan has been in supporting innovation. Nevertheless, to foster more innovative approaches and ideas, there is a need for guidance on how to innovate with respect to (a) the United Nations development system reform context and the QCPR framework; (b) humanitarian and emergency contexts; (c) innovative partnership engagement; and (d) internal organizational structural and cultural barriers.

## **5.8 Harnessing the power of evidence as a driver of change for children**

53. Evidence from a review of the relevant documents suggests that the effectiveness of monitoring and results-based management systems at the country level has been an ongoing challenge for UNICEF. A similar challenge was also identified in the development effectiveness review report and the lessons learned report of the midterm review.

54. All current CPDs include a monitoring and evaluation section, often emphasizing the intent to work with government partners to improve data quality and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The sections, however, tend to vary in their degree of rigour and completeness, suggesting ongoing concerns about country offices' production and use of monitoring data. The country offices feel burdened by the number of reporting requests coming from headquarters and frustrated by the seeming lack of analytical evidence for decision-making shared with the country offices on data those offices collect.

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<sup>11</sup> Referenced in UNICEF, Information note on the implementation of General Assembly resolution [72/279](#) on the repositioning of the United Nations development system, 2020.

55. Under the current Strategic Plan, there have been some efforts to address these issues, particularly within the Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, where significant improvements have been made or are in progress with a view to accelerating programme effectiveness.

**D. To what extent has the Strategic Plan contributed to fostering partnerships and new ways of working?**

56. The introduction of change strategy 5 (Harnessing the power of business and markets for children) represents an improvement compared with the previous Strategic Plan. Evidence from the development effectiveness review report indicates that, even prior to the introduction of the change strategies, the organization had strong capacity to engage with partners. Nevertheless, the review also indicated that partnerships with the private and business sectors (other than for fundraising purposes) were less common and in general less successful. Similarly, prior to recent efforts, including the introduction of the common chapter, this change strategy and the United Nations development system reform, joint work with other United Nations agencies was observed, but in a less systematic and coordinated way.

57. Overall, evidence suggests that although the Strategic Plan confirms the importance of engaging with civil society organizations (CSOs), this commitment does not fully reflect the growing importance of civil society movements in the advocacy space. Innovative partnerships with CSOs, particularly those led by youth, have the potential to accelerate results.

58. By 2018, global programme partnerships took on an important role in leveraging UNICEF organizational and financial resources into action for children. The partnerships are both a critically important source of resources (see Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) and a means of leveraging the advocacy, technical strength and convening power of UNICEF to advance progress in all five Goal Areas of the Strategic Plan. Given their importance, there is a need to revisit UNICEF engagement with global programme partnerships, perhaps through a major thematic evaluation.

**E. To what extent has the Strategic Plan enabled UNICEF country offices to support national priorities to achieve child-focused Sustainable Development Goals?**

59. All CPDs refer to children's rights. However, feedback from country office informants indicates that the concept of rights tends to be perceived as aspirational. The main challenge is to adequately measure progress towards realizing the rights of every child in every country. A clearer bridge is needed between realizing children's rights and the day-to-day operations in countries.

60. For country office efforts to contribute to UNICEF global goals and key result areas, the Strategic Plan must be holistic enough to accommodate the vast array of national priorities and needs of children in all different contexts. Respondents concur that the current Plan allows for such flexibility and enables the alignment of country programme components.

61. Some country offices voiced their satisfaction that the Strategic Plan was holistic and innovative enough to respond to such new and emerging national priorities as mental health, digitalization and climate change. Others, especially those in humanitarian contexts, perceived a lack of synergy between their country contexts and the current Plan. A subset of country offices face limitations in their engagements

with Government, mostly imposed by donor Governments' specific requirements, limiting country offices' ability to respond to national priorities.

62. A key challenge when drafting the new strategic plan will be to accommodate such a variety of country contexts. There is a call for a stronger balance between basic needs and emerging threats to children and greater advocacy work, particularly in the context of potential regressions due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Striking such a balance could be a significant challenge, especially in emerging priority areas without enough funding allocations.

63. With regard to supporting national priorities, country offices find guidance in the eight change strategies specified in the Strategic Plan. Nevertheless, the offices have called for more context-specific evidence and guidance on how to effectively implement the change strategies in relation to certain new key development areas, including climate change and mental health.

### **III. Conclusions**

64. This first evaluation of the Strategic Plan describes and acknowledges the complexities that the design of such a strategy entails for a highly complex organization such as UNICEF, in view of its dual humanitarian and development mandate and the multiple roles involved in being the United Nations agency for children. Analysis of the Plan led to the conclusions set out below.

65. Evidence indicates that the Strategic Plan is well regarded and utilized as a framework, as reflected in direct feedback from the senior management of country offices and the systematic analysis of country programming documentation. At the country-office level, the Plan is considered to be an important guiding document and a framework that defines a common narrative to rally support for accountability purposes with donors and to show concrete global results. The holistic structure of the Plan gives country offices the flexibility to adapt to the organization's multiple and complex roles, mandates and diverse contexts and especially to support national priorities in coordination with other United Nations agencies. Nevertheless, the need for balance between a holistic framework and organizational focus is critical to provide a collective vision in support of children.

66. The evaluation observed that more could be done to systematically (a) incorporate the voices of children; and (b) represent their voices and speak out against any violation of child rights, particularly of those further left behind. The current Strategic Plan did not contain the required provisions for UNICEF to act as the voice of children in all contexts, including in the operationalization of the United Nations development system reform at the country-office level. Despite being guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and covering the child-focused Sustainable Development Goals, the current Strategic Plan fails to give enough attention to including the voices of children in the planning and operationalization processes in various contexts. This omission represents an important gap, especially when compared to the much clearer approach to partnering with various actors, including Government, CSOs, the private sector and other United Nations agencies, which is clearly articulated in the change strategies of the Plan.

67. The short time frame of the Strategic Plan represents a challenge for country offices planning to address system changes and emerging threats to children. Evidence also indicates that the short-term period of the Plan has constrained the organization's ability to have a long-term vision, which is needed to develop the resilience, development and peacebuilding components of the humanitarian-development nexus. Interviews with country office senior management described the transaction costs of

learning and using new monitoring and reporting systems with each new strategic plan.

68. For a long-term strategic plan for children to be viable, a deliberate orientation is needed to provide strategic policy advice to Governments and global and regional partners on how to address structural barriers and revising priorities. This long-term strategy needs to be developed in the context of the United Nations development system reform, through better coordination and collaboration with other United Nations agencies. The lack of vertical logic between higher-level outcome indicators and country office-level indicators was seen as a general weakness of the Strategic Plan. Several key stakeholders shared this concern, which was validated by a review of relevant documentation as well as an analysis of key indicators.

69. An important point generally presented by country offices was that the heavy burden of Strategic Plan reporting requirements was not balanced by practical benefits for direct decision-making. Additionally, there is a widespread perception that the Plan was largely designed to fulfil headquarters' needs. Although it is generally acknowledged that the design of central planning documents such as the Strategic Plan represents a challenge given the diversity of countries and regions in which UNICEF operates, incentives and systems to share lessons learned are critical. Examples from regional and subregional groups and inter-agency networks on evidence-sharing, technical capacity collaboration and advocacy support should be used to guide the process. The sharing of lessons learned becomes even more relevant in the context of the United Nations development system reform to ensure good coordination and collaboration with other United Nations agencies.

70. Given the organization's good understanding of programme approaches to deal with specific issues affecting children, a strategic plan that gives more emphasis to change strategies, along with accompanying efforts to ensure the right capacities to implement them, establishes the basis for the organization to be more agile, to respond to new threats to children and to comprehend how to collaborate better with other United Nations agencies. Even prior to the introduction of change strategies in the current Strategic Plan, various examples from country offices indicated a growing recognition of the importance of change strategies in identifying how the offices successfully achieve results.

71. The diverse country contexts in which UNICEF works require not only an understanding of the different needs and corresponding national priorities, but also demand greater appreciation of how to achieve priority targets, since the use and contribution of the change strategies is likely to be highly country context-specific. Relevant and country-specific monitoring and evaluation data are critical to understanding how the country-specific change strategies could improve the agility of programmatic work at the country-office level.

72. The general recognition that the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals requires a holistic and multisectoral approach has been closely mirrored by an acknowledgement of the many challenges that still exist. Despite the significant structural improvements of the current Strategic Plan through its Goal Area clusters and the growing guidance on collaboration and coordination given by the United Nations development system reform, there are still many challenges to using a multisectoral approach. These include reporting on multisectoral efforts, siloed government partnership structures and restrictions imposed by targeted or earmarked funding. UNICEF must be aware of pressures that might move strategic planning back to more siloed approaches, in support of both country office and joint United Nations system programming.

73. The multisectoral structure of the Strategic Plan has given country offices the elements to understand and effectively design multisectoral strategies. That learning process, nevertheless, requires time and resources to achieve the proper integration of multisectoral approaches into country-office structures and to account for the requirements of the United Nations country team. Important lessons can be drawn from a variety of country contexts and government structures, learning from country offices that embrace multisectoral approaches. These lessons include the need to make significant structural changes in country offices in support of multisectoral approaches; strengthening country office designs of programmes across specific sectors; and fully embracing such approaches in CPDs. The lessons should inform organizational efforts. Additionally, to achieve an organization-wide transformative multidimensional approach, it is critical to understand the specific structures, political will and incentives for government partners to embrace a multisectoral approach, as well as the complexities linked to the coordination and collaboration with other United Nations agencies in line with United Nations country team planning requirements.

74. Significant advances in gender equity have been observed across various programme areas, particularly those related to the Gender Action Plan target priorities, as well as in operationalizing gender equality efforts, enabling the organization to allocate resources to these targeted priorities. As noted, however, in the evaluation of the Gender Action Plan, despite those improvements there is still a need to improve gender equality mainstreaming in both programmes and institutional capacity and systems, and more needs to be done to align organizational efforts with current gender realities on the ground. UNICEF has the capacity to support United Nations country teams and regional partners with gender equality issues, taking a proactive approach, particularly in countries in which UNICEF has strong capacity.

75. The Strategic Plan made a positive contribution to humanitarian action by positioning it as a cross-cutting priority. Simultaneously, the wider United Nations system has provided a clear division of labour in the humanitarian and emergency world. However, acknowledging that some aspects are beyond the organization's control, UNICEF faces a disconnect between its humanitarian and development work. Bottlenecks related to the separate overarching systems for humanitarian and development programming, siloed resourcing and capacity and separate monitoring and reporting systems prevent UNICEF from achieving more-effective nexus programming, particularly in countries with protracted crises.

76. The introduction of a procedure on risk-informed programming was a useful step in enhancing the UNICEF approach, as it strengthened the humanitarian and development nexus. Political and socioeconomic contextual elements have, however, not been systematically included when developing risk-informed programming analyses, particularly for country offices working in protracted humanitarian crisis contexts. This programming analysis must be done to inform country office programming in the wider context of United Nations system coordination and collaboration. By not factoring in the economic and political context, humanitarian response may be delayed, as the risk analysis may not effectively account for some of the more severe risks for children.

77. With regard to the distribution of resources, evidence reveals an allocation pattern that is highly concentrated in a small number of countries, driven in large part by humanitarian-targeted allocations. The skewed expense distribution has been accompanied by a smaller (than that originally planned for 2019) proportion of regular resources as a share of total resources, which has had important implications for the operationalization of the Strategic Plan. It is critical for the organization to use different tools to address changes in funding needs with Member States, National

Committees, individual large donors, regional and global funding networks and the like. In that connection, it is important to tailor advocacy narratives supported by evidence-based reports to answer each donor's specific requirements and those of their constituencies. Existing funding tools could be utilized to advocate jointly, requiring significant coordination with other United Nations agencies, for greater funding directed to regular resources. In addition to individual contributors, the structured funding dialogue, informed by the funding compact, and the Grand Bargain agreement provide such avenues to encourage Member States to continue their support to bring core resources for multisectoral and multi-agency joint work and coordination in humanitarian action.

78. The evaluation acknowledges that the new strategic plan is being developed in a geopolitical context in which the United Nations system in general is more vulnerable, and where the relevance of the United Nations is being challenged. This reinforces the need for United Nations agencies to partner for increased synergy. The organization's efforts and resources in supporting the United Nations development system reform through a flexible strategic framework that could support various country-specific national priorities in coordination with the resident coordinator were found to be insufficient. A flexible strategic framework is greatly needed to enable a long-term vision that would allow for long-term planning and better coordination with other United Nations agencies, providing evidence to countries on how change strategies could better help the organization's agile response, including those related to the ongoing United Nations development system reform process.

79. Strengthening reporting and linking funding to multisectoral work are critical for achieving the child-focused Sustainable Development Goals; overcoming bottlenecks that inhibit efforts to link humanitarian and development programming; and coordinating and collaborating with other United Nations agencies. It is clear that trade-offs between functional and effective coordination across agencies, as well as the related management and coordination costs, must be considered while partnering for results to support the United Nations development system reform. UNICEF could have put to greater use its comparative advantages in support of the reform, including promoting the organization's core mission to be the voice for the rights of all children, leaving no one behind.

#### IV. Recommendations

80. The recommendations of the evaluation are derived from the findings and conclusions. They have been presented to senior management and informed by comments received during a workshop held in November 2020.

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**Recommendation 1: Conceptualize the strategic plan as a holistic framework, reflecting the voices of children, with a limited number of priorities pitched at the outcome level along with clear paths for collaboration with other United Nations agencies.**

- UNICEF should ensure that the next plan builds on the holistic approach and flexibility gains from the current Strategic Plan. The new plan should therefore be clearly designed as a framework that provides direction to country offices while allowing them to adapt in support of national priorities and the United Nations cooperation framework. In addition, the next strategic framework should spell out key areas of work and related results that will require a whole-of-organization approach for implementation. Consideration must be given to support collaborative mechanisms between headquarters, regional offices and country offices, as well as with other United Nations agencies, to ensure that



the voices of children are included in internal and joint programming and planning, and that no child is left behind.

- Moving forward, the relevant divisions must ensure that the new strategic framework clearly identifies and promotes new change strategies on:
  - The systematic involvement of children in programming
  - The role of UNICEF as the voice of children and for children, in all contexts

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**Recommendation 2: Develop a longer-term 2022–2030 strategy for children, with a strong focus on outcomes, allowing for flexibility to address emerging threats to children, in collaboration with other United Nations agencies.**

- The new strategic framework should adopt a long-term 2022–2030 time frame with a phased implementation approach, aligned with the 2030 Agenda. Anchored in accelerating child-focused Sustainable Development Goals, the new strategic framework should have an outcome-level focus and logical links with country-level results, allowing for flexibility to adapt to emerging threats to children (including those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) and facilitating growing collaboration with other United Nations agencies.
- Prioritize, in the results framework and change strategies, UNICEF comparative advantages in providing critical policy advice to influence change for children and to address emerging threats that constrain the rights of children. Country programming and operations documents, including common country assessments, UNSDCFs, programme strategy notes, CPDs and related theories of change, and country programme management plans, should more explicitly include the provision of strategic policy advice to fully utilize UNICEF comparative and collaborative advantages in support of the 2030 Agenda and the overall United Nations development system reform process.
- Across all levels of the organization, reporting systems should continue to move away from incentives that lead to heavy reporting and towards a learning and exchange of evidence, both within UNICEF and with other United Nations agencies, that could inform the continued adaptation of programmes, based on:
  - Timely monitoring, strategic programme and operational reviews and real-time evaluations, with supporting technical capacity from regional offices and in coordination with the United Nations country team.
  - Sharing lessons learned and experiences within the organization, with government partners, other United Nations agencies and other development actors, as well as with donors.

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**Recommendation 3: Place equal emphasis on measuring change strategies and enablers alongside programme results.**

- In operationalizing the new strategic framework, UNICEF must place equal attention on progress in programme results, change strategies and enablers. For purposes of monitoring and learning, this must be done in a manner that feeds back into the organization to strengthen its agility to respond to emerging threats to children, in coordination with other United Nations agencies.

- Change strategies and enablers must be more systematically monitored, evaluated and presented in key management documents such as the Executive Director's annual report to the Executive Board, country-level evaluations, multi-agency joint evaluations and reports, and donor and National Committee reports. This information will be critical in order to determine country-specific change strategies and enablers in support of more agile and sustainable country-level programming and better programming and planning collaboration with other United Nations agencies. To this end, responsible divisions and offices must ensure that there is adequate capacity in all contexts for better reporting, monitoring, and evidence-generation of country-specific change strategies to improve country office agility to better support national priorities and child-focused Sustainable Development Goals in coordination with other United Nations agencies.

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**Recommendation 4: Strengthen outcome-level reporting and appropriate funding sources for a multisectoral approach.**

- Building on the multisectoral approach of the current Strategic Plan Goal Area clusters, the next strategic framework must advance such multisectoral arrangements and establish relevant outcome-level indicators. These improvements should include and address the greater multisectoral complexities of joint programming, in line with United Nations country team planning requirements. UNICEF must continue to negotiate with donors to appropriately link funding sources to multisectoral programming, to encourage the organization to overcome constraining siloed approaches. Moving away from siloed approaches will contribute to the understanding of how to better enhance collaborations with other relevant United Nations agencies.

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**Recommendation 5: Reflect the organization's dual development and humanitarian mandate in the long-term strategy, overcome bottlenecks of duality in programming, reporting, resource mobilization and staff capacity and integrate peacebuilding processes.**

- Moving forward, several steps are necessary to address the existing bottlenecks preventing more effective programming to strengthen the humanitarian-development nexus:
  - The strategic framework must ensure provisions to avoid the duality in programming, reporting, resource mobilization and staff capacity in support of the achievement of the organization's dual humanitarian and development mandate in support of children.
  - Ensure resources to support flexible staff mobilization to gain the necessary work experience in humanitarian and development contexts.
  - Secure resources to finance advocacy work with donors to secure flexible and long-term funding, to ensure longer-term activities that will address the humanitarian and development nexus, with the aim of building a clear path to integrate peacebuilding into the organization's strategy.
- UNICEF must continue to support the integration of risk-informed programming linking humanitarian and development programming into country office programming and planning documents, with a focus on informing United Nations system-wide documents. Moving forward, the new strategic framework must ensure that there is adequate attention in country

offices to building staff capacity, resources, and operational management support to incorporate political and economic context into the assessment of risks and opportunities to more comprehensively inform humanitarian and development nexus programming for children.

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**Recommendation 6: Address the skewed distribution of resources, particularly in non-humanitarian contexts, to ensure that no one is left behind.**

- In funding negotiations and agreements with donors, responsible UNICEF divisions must prioritize addressing the skewed distribution of resources, particularly as it affects country offices in non-humanitarian contexts. UNICEF must encourage joint advocacy efforts, with a United Nations system-wide focus aimed at allocating resources to support fundraising advocacy efforts with specific tailored narratives for different donors, with the support of National Committees and regional funding networks. Efforts should include utilizing all existing channels of negotiations, including annual donor consultations, proposal submission processes and structured funding dialogue, in coordination with other United Nations agencies.

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**Recommendation 7: Ensure provisions to support the United Nations development system agenda while strengthening the UNICEF mission, comparative and collaborative advantages.**

- In operationalizing the next strategic framework, responsible divisions must ensure that resources are provided to continue working together with all other United Nations agencies in the context of the United Nations development system reform. A multisectoral approach must be used in support of existing joint priorities, including data and evidence generation, climate change, gender equality, poverty eradication, and improving adolescent and maternal health, as well as other relevant areas of work that will emerge during the preparation of the next strategic framework. The new strategic framework must ensure that UNICEF collaborative advantages – including being a highly decentralized organization with a universal field presence, strong promotion of community-based mobilization and capacity-building efforts to support national partners to achieve child-focused Sustainable Development Goals – are adequately resourced and used in support of the Goals and for UNICEF to become a stronger voice for all children.
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## V. Draft decision

### *The Executive Board*

*Takes note* of the evaluation of UNICEF work for children in urban settings, its summary ([E/ICEF/2021/3](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2021/4](#)) and of the evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021, its summary ([E/ICEF/2021/5](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2021/6](#)).

## **Annex**

### **Evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021**

1. Due to space limitations, the evaluation report of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 is not contained within the present annex.
  2. The report is available from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website: [www.unicef.org/evaluation/executive-board](http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/executive-board).
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