

UNICEF EVALUATION OF IMPACT

Strategy and Action Framework 2022–2025
Summary Brochure



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The global map included in this publication is stylized and not to scale. It does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or area or the delimitation of any frontiers. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the Parties. The final boundary between the Republic of the Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. The final status of the Abyei area has not yet been determined.

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Why evaluate impact?

Meaningful change in the lives of children does not happen overnight. With less than a decade left to report on progress on the Agenda 2030 targets, UNICEF allocates substantial resources and efforts to accelerate results for children (Figure 1). Knowing if these efforts make a difference for children is a vital task and our shared responsibility. Evaluation plays a key role in delivering feedback on results through impartial and credible

assessment of what works, what does not and why. With this Strategy and Action Framework the UNICEF evaluation function responds to calls from the Executive Board and internal stakeholders articulating a roadmap to a more strategic and consistent institutional effort to demonstrate effectiveness of UNICEF and government-led programmes. Its rationale is driven by the need for:

Greater accountability and transparency: UNICEF has a responsibility to maximize children's social welfare with the public funds it receives. Over the course of the 2018–2021 Strategic Plan, UNICEF invested just over US\$23 billion on programmes and interventions in five thematic areas. With only 36 impact evaluations conducted over about the same period, the scale of rigorous evidence to date falls short of the scale of UNICEF development efforts and does not allow sound public judgement on the relative effectiveness of chosen models to deliver benefits to millions of children.

Improved development effectiveness, and organizational learning at all levels: Increasingly, UNICEF programmes support governments to address multifaceted social problems and work in complex environments. As a result, interventions become more innovative in their approaches. No social solution is perfect from the outset and if implemented without testing can often do more harm than good. By identifying early what works we can allocate resources to where they can make the biggest difference and minimize unintended negative outcomes.

Meeting an ambitious, results-oriented UNICEF 2022–2025 agenda through rigorous¹ impact and outcome-level evaluative evidence will allow UNICEF to:

- ▶ allocate efficiently limited resources at the decentralized level where they will make the biggest difference for children as well as mobilize new resources by demonstrating the added value of UNICEF efforts to achieve progress for SDGs;

- ▶ foster institutional learning and enhance the programme implementation process by strengthening the underlying programme logic and testing its assumptions; and
- ▶ enable UNICEF to stay relevant for the national policy process, strengthen advocacy where it matters, and critically assess UNICEF's contribution to results outlined in the 2022–2025 Strategic Plan.

Audience and scope

2017–2021

\$23
billion

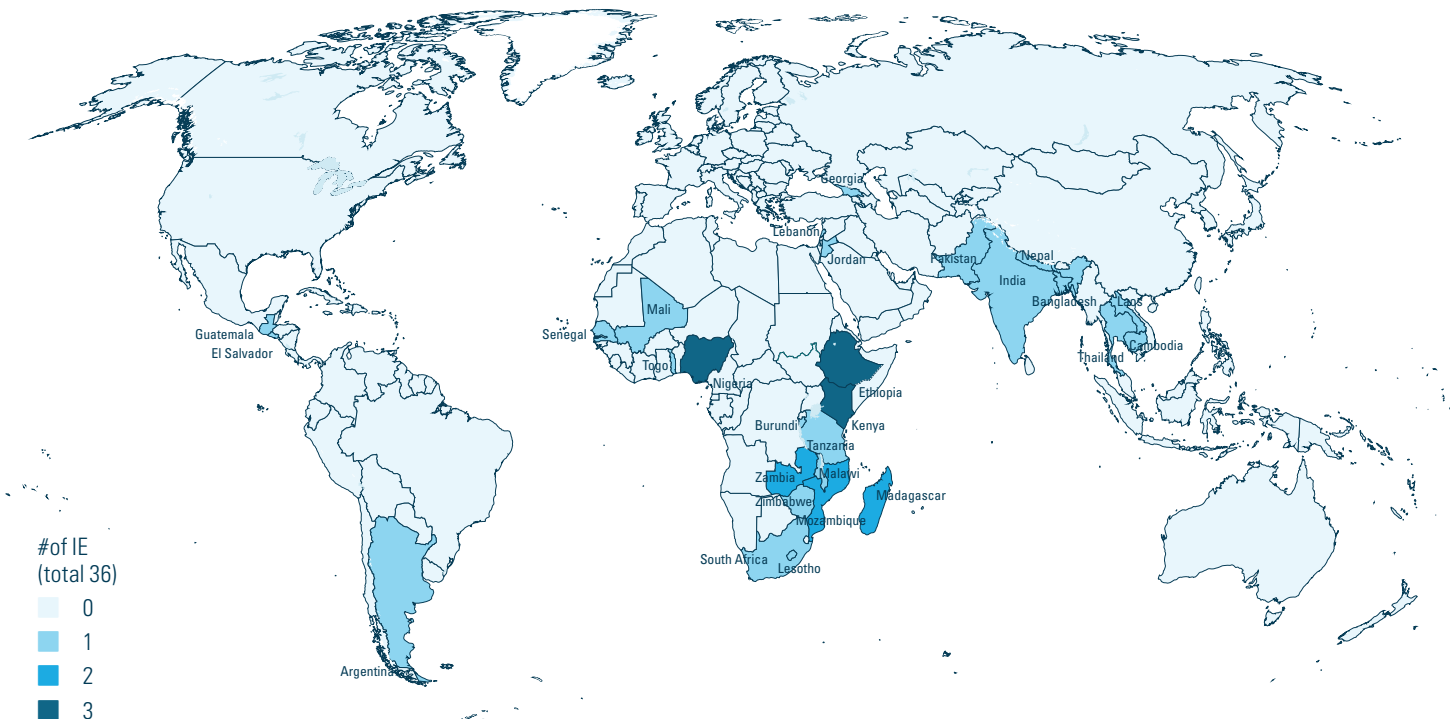
spent on
programmes

36
impact
evaluations
produced

The Strategy serves as a practical reference for UNICEF regional and country offices, evaluation, monitoring and evaluation and programme staff in support of their efforts to inform national plans and child-focused policies with robust evaluative evidence. It outlines strategic directions for a technical area of UNICEF evaluative work covering operational definitions, identified challenges and three strategic pillars of actions to respond to these challenges.

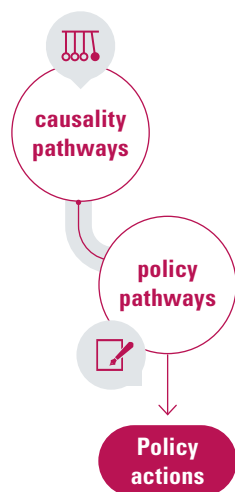
The strategy also discusses UNICEF approaches to methodological and process-related aspects of implementation and outlines partnership and resource requirements.

Figure 1. Country coverage with UNICEF impact evaluations 2017–2021



Defining impact at UNICEF and its evaluative modalities

For the purpose of the Strategy, **impact is defined as the positive and negative, direct or indirect, primary and secondary, short, medium or long-term change in the lives of children and families produced by an intervention.**



UNICEF evaluations which examine impact will have to look at the results through the short-term and intermediary outcomes defining them as causality pathways to sustainable, long-term impacts. This is critical because ‘causality pathways’ can be translated into ‘policy pathways’ with concrete policy actions towards desired transformative change. The latter can imply a system-level change as well as tangible and measurable well-being outcomes that can be evaluated through a rigorous counterfactual applied in a specific context.

The UNICEF definition underscores the importance of a scientific framework offered by rigorous impact evaluation (IE) while also recognizing the value and unique insights provided by qualitative, non-experimental evaluative approaches to examine causal relationships.

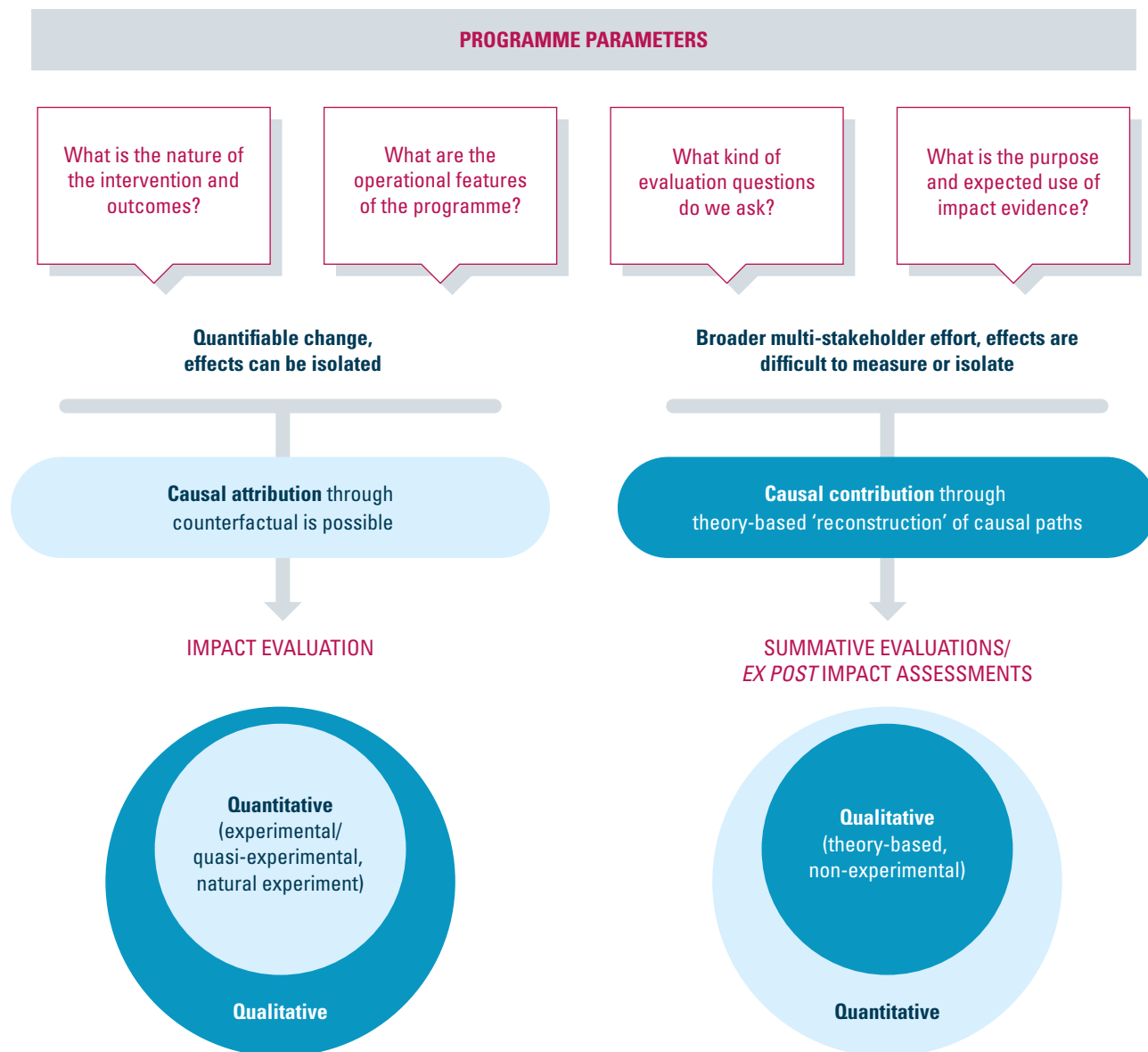
Given the broad programmatic mandate of UNICEF, the Strategy outlines ‘the evaluation of impact’ as a general scope of evaluative work at the outcome and impact level, that employs two distinctive strands of impact enquiry (Figure 2) reflective of evaluative purpose (as opposed to method) in examining either **causal attribution or causal contribution** of a specific programme or its components to programme impacts.²

The evaluator’s task is to define the evaluative purpose aligned with evidence needs as well as the feasibility and desirability of establishing ‘causal attribution’ to programme results or ‘causal contribution’. This is typically done based on assessment of programme characteristics such as the nature of the programme, coverage, scale, timeline and others. This leads to the choice of the most appropriate and feasible evaluative modality and methodological approaches, including those that construct a rigorous counterfactual in complex programmatic settings.

Impact evaluation aims to empirically establish attribution by quantifying causal links between the intervention (projects, programmes, policies, networks or capacity development) and outcomes of interest, typically at the targeted beneficiary level. It does so by establishing a counterfactual scenario which allows us to see what would happen in the absence of the intervention or exposure to it, thus allowing

a critical judgment on whether the intervention makes a difference and to what extent. It can serve both formative and summative purposes and respond equally to learning and accountability needs. They are best implemented in combination with appropriate qualitative approaches that answer questions on ‘Why?’ and ‘How’ to deepen our understanding and interpretation of observed results.

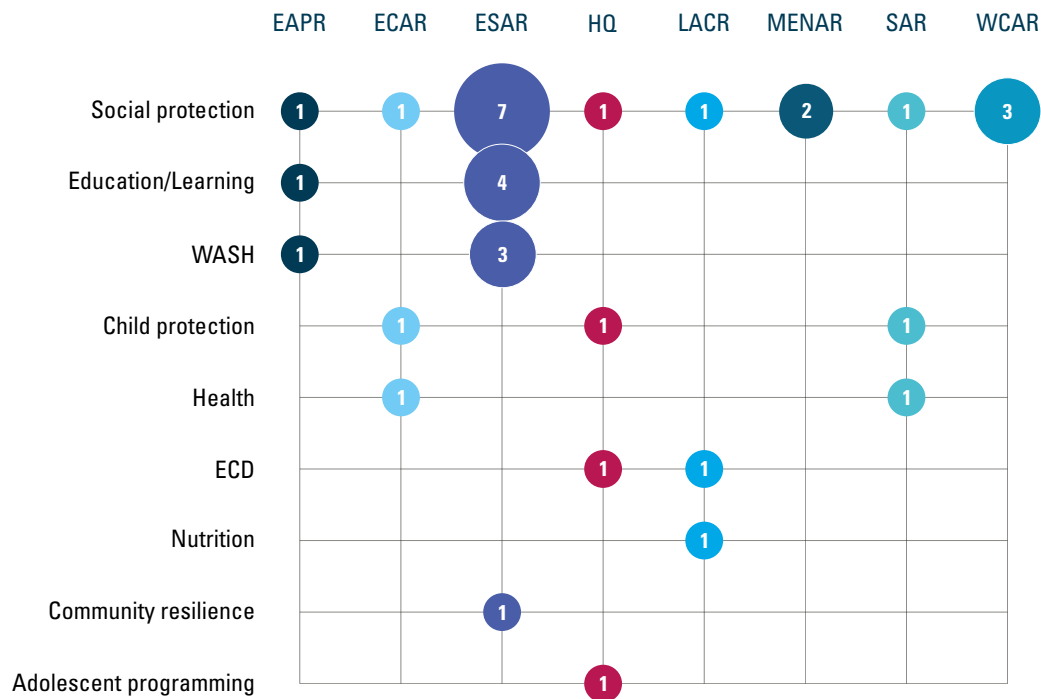
Figure 2. Selecting evaluative approaches to measure programme outcomes and impact



Challenges to date

The diagnostics of impact evidence commissioned or conducted by UNICEF between 2017 and 2021 showed limited institutional demand for evaluations at the outcome and impact levels and a lack of strategic, at scale, thematic planning for such evidence, resulting in unbalanced coverage (Figure 3). The Evidence Information Systems Integration database (EISI) registered only 36 rigorous impact evaluations (or 6 per cent of the total 627 evaluative products) over the corresponding period (2017–2021). We can observe highly disproportionate thematic and geographic coverage benefiting the social protection sector and Eastern and Southern Africa Region. There seem to be particularly acute coverage gaps in Goal Areas 1 (Nutrition/Health) and 3 (Child Protection).³

Figure 3. Absolute number of UNICEF impact evaluations 2017–2021 by thematic areas and regions

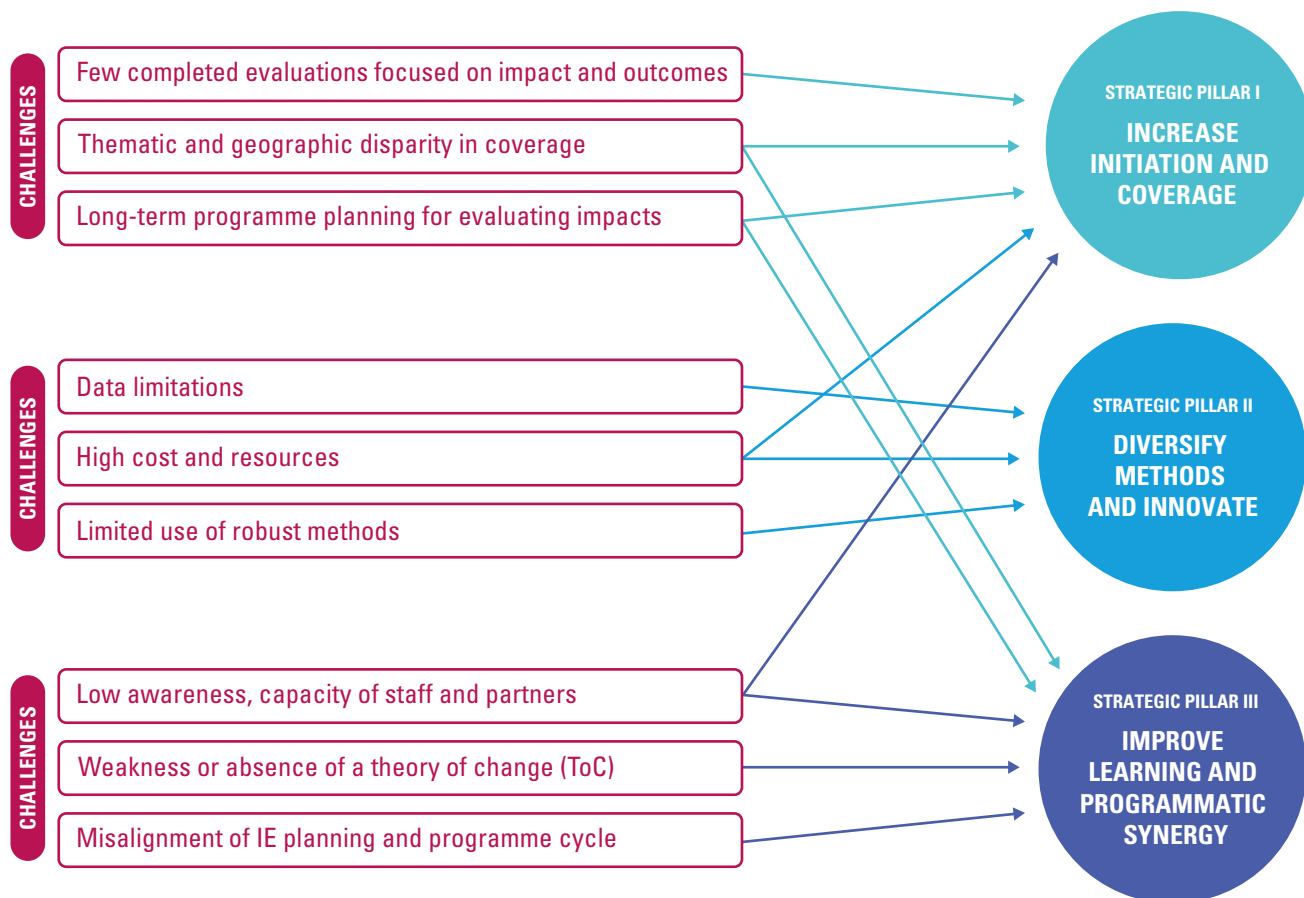


Note: EAPR (East Asia and Pacific Region), ECAR (Europe and Central Asia Region), ECD (early childhood development), ESAR (Eastern and Southern Africa Region), HQ (Headquarters), LACR (Latin America and the Caribbean Region), MENAR (Middle East and North Africa Region), SAR (South Asia Region), WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene), WCAR (West and Central Africa Region).

The results of an online staff survey also underscored persistent bottlenecks in initiation, planning, implementation and uptake of evaluative evidence focused on outcomes and impacts at the different stages of the programme cycle (Figure 4). The interconnected nature of these

problems suggests a need for a more systemic and strategic approach for evaluations of development effectiveness of UNICEF interventions, which allows integration of an incentive structure and requirements within a long-term development time frame.

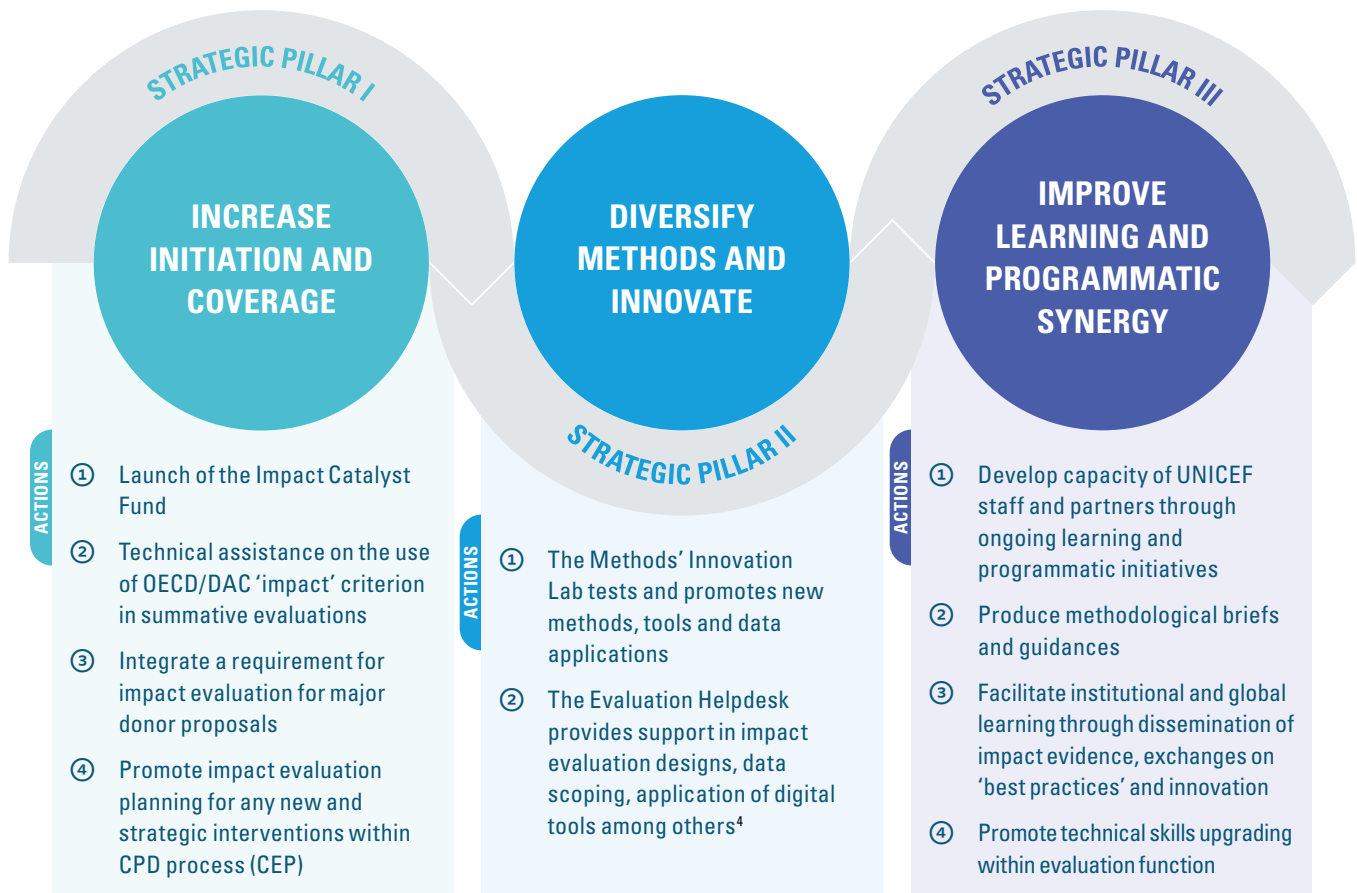
Figure 4. Linking strategic pillars with the most common challenges for planning, managing and using impact evaluations



Proposed strategic pillars and actions

The challenges and bottlenecks identified in evaluating impacts leads to the choice of priority pillars for this Strategy (Figure 5). These are formulated bearing in mind the feasibility of action within the period covering the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025, and alignment with the vision for the evaluation function for 2022–2025. The latter underscores the need for greater rigour and a strategic focus in all UNICEF evaluative work.

Figure 5. Strategic Pillars and key actions



Note: OECD/DAC (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee), CPD (Country Programme Development), CEP (Costed Evaluation Plan)

Methods

UNICEF evaluative work to assess outcome and impact-level change is based on the following general principles:

- ▶ **No single method is best** for addressing the variety of important programmatic questions, but not all questions can be answered under a single type of evaluation.
- ▶ **Comparative advantage of the method** in application to the specific question should be considered for the choice of the methods or analytical approaches.
- ▶ **Complementarity of methods** ensures a more multidimensional picture of impact.

Applying these principles in practice, UNICEF will promote 'purpose-led' or 'question-led' methodologies that utilize the range of methods available to answer relevant causal questions grounded in the dichotomy of attribution vis-à-vis contribution.

- ▶ **Experimental (RCT), quasi-experimental and natural experiment designs with credible counterfactual.** RCTs remain the most rigorous impact evaluation approach. It allows causal inference to observed results (attribution to programme effects) through a constructed counterfactual and should be selected in situations when evidence can be generated in an ethical way, randomization is feasible and appropriate for the scale of the programme, and its utilization is clear to all stakeholders. Other methods such as instrumental variables, regression discontinuity design (RDD), difference-in-difference (DID), and matching, use statistical techniques to find the closest matching groups of individuals, thus

allowing a valid comparison. Increasingly, utilization of administrative, household and other types of data provide opportunities to construct a valid counterfactual at a lower cost and shorter timeframe.

- ▶ **Non-experimental, theory-based approaches.** Qualitative methods and techniques of causal inference focusing on the questions 'Why?' and 'How?' allow better understanding of the mechanism through which change happened, and generate the most contextualized evidence on results of UNICEF actions. These include contribution analysis, process tracing, qualitative impact protocol (QulP), and 'most significant change', among others. They can be used in summative, and in some cases process-related, evaluations complementing experimental and quasi-experimental designs.
- ▶ **Cost analysis.** Cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) of new pilot interventions or projects should be an integral part of any impact evaluation. The analysis should reflect actual cost and observable impacts of the programme, helping evaluators and implementers to estimate value for money and guide decisions to scale up.

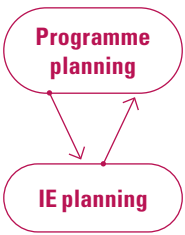
This strategy promotes mixed-methods, nested designs which combine a strategic focus on outcome and long-term change with process-related evaluative questions. This kind of evaluation design will help to meet demand for programme learning within a short-term time frame without losing sight of strategic evidence needs that require time and long-term effort.

Counterfactual



find the closest comparison for the unit of study

Fostering programme alignment and policy uptake



Any impact-focused evaluation design has to be embedded in continuous and iterative engagement with national partners and key stakeholders to ensure credibility and facilitate policy uptake (e.g. decisions on scaling up). Early integration of evaluative thinking into programme planning and intervention design is a critical condition to ensure relevance of impact evidence for policy needs. This Strategy encourages direct stakeholder engagement through four interconnected elements of the evaluation process (Figure 6):

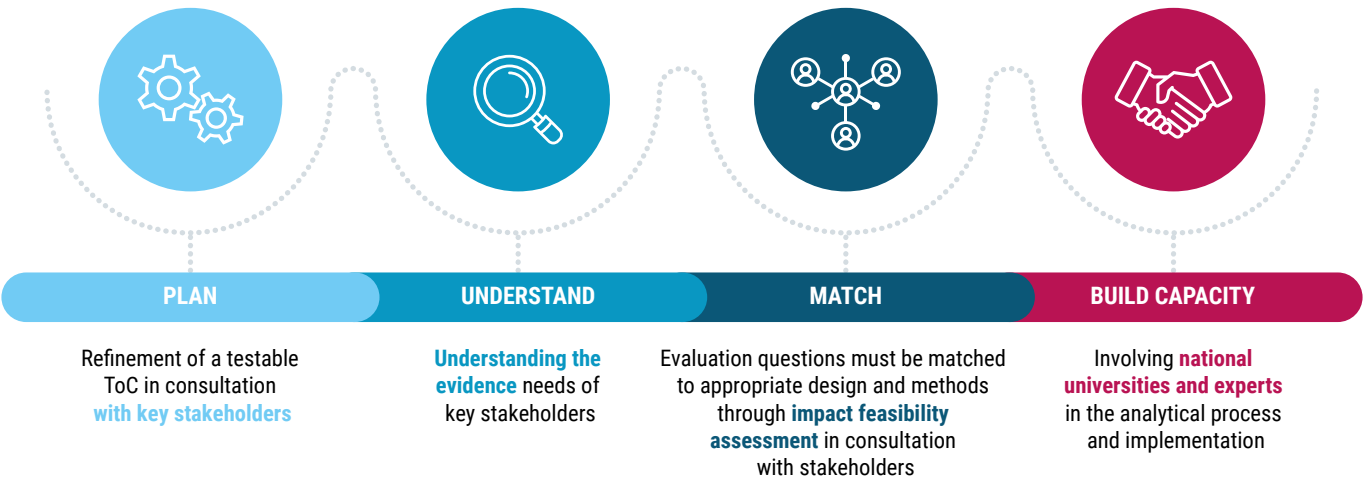
PLANNING: Refinement of a testable theory of change (ToC) in consultation with key stakeholders is done alongside detailed consideration of the type, scope and characteristics of the intervention package to be evaluated.

SCOPING: Understanding the evidence needs of key stakeholders can be done through impact scoping or impact feasibility assessment.

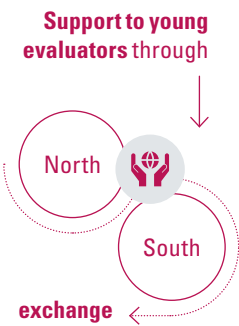
MATCHING: Evaluation questions must be matched to appropriate design and methods through impact feasibility assessment in close consultation with stakeholders.

BUILDING CAPACITY: Developing capacity of partners has to be integrated into the whole process and supported through stronger ties with national academic and research institutions.

Figure 6. Engagement with policy stakeholders for credibility and utilization

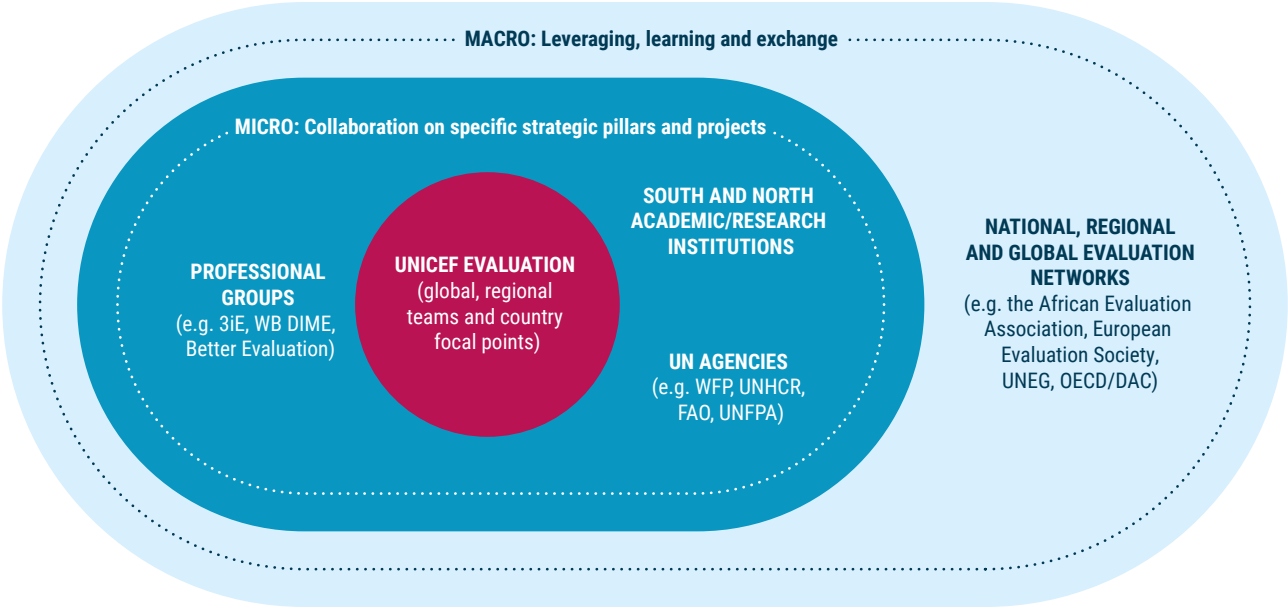


Leveraging national and global partnerships



UNICEF evaluation of impact work will build on current global practices and experiences of other UN agencies (e.g. World Food Programme)⁵ and other international development institutions (e.g. the World Bank)⁶ in institutionalizing impact evaluations within wider efforts towards development effectiveness. The Evaluation Office (EO), regional evaluation teams and evaluation focal points at the country level will expand existing, and form new, partnerships to build demand for rigorous impact evidence within the organization, and will purposefully plan the collection, processing and dissemination of findings and recommendations. The partnership approaches will focus on bridging the expertise of the academic institutions in the North and South as well as supporting capacity of young researchers in low-, and middle-income countries.

Figure 7. UNICEF evaluation of impact partnership ecosystem



Note: DIME (Development Impact Evaluation), FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), OECD/DAC (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee), UNEG (United Nations Evaluation Group), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), WB (World Bank), WFP (World Food Programme)

Implementation and oversight

The Evaluation of Impact Strategy and Action Framework is formulated in accordance with the UNICEF 2018 Evaluation Policy. A revision of the current Evaluation Policy will be informed by the current Strategy and its underlying principles.

Adequate resourcing is critical for successful implementation of the Strategic Pillars and its actions. This will require pooling financial resources from three main internal and external sources: a) country-led allocations as part of regular resources of thematic funds; b) as a percentage of the global evaluation pooled fund, earmarked for new areas of strategic importance; c) donor and government funding.

Diversification of funding sources and their complementarity are critical to reduce the risk of limited coverage of impact evidence driven by single regions, the size of country programmes and/or identified donor preferences.

The Director of the EO will provide general oversight of the Strategy implementation and will report annually to Executive Board members on the implementation progress. Within the EO the newly formed Methods, Impact and Learning section, led by a Senior Evaluation Specialist, will oversee the Strategy implementation at global level and provide technical assistance to the regional and country offices.

Conclusions

The success of this Strategy is a vital stepping stone to increase UNICEF accountability for results and learn about effectiveness of its strategic, large scale, most innovative interventions for children. Organizational and social return on investment in rigorous impact evidence for UNICEF will be high. Potentially evidence of impact will not only influence political decisions to scale up the most effective interventions for children, but can also save millions of dollars by correcting the course or abandoning approaches that do not work or could work better. In the long term impact evidence will contribute across the organization to a culture that is focused on results, rather than aspirations.

- 1 There is no universally applied definition of 'rigorous' in impact evaluation. For the purpose of this document, it is understood as the application of a combination of methods that aim to isolate the effects of the programme from other factors and potential selection bias, ultimately aiming to achieve internal validity and high credibility of findings.
- 2 See the full Strategy document for fuller explanation of these two terms.
- 3 Under the new UNICEF 2022–2025 Strategic Plan.
- 4 Regional evaluation teams can lead discussions on how to evaluate outcomes and impacts during annual regional programme review/network meetings.
- 5 [WFP Impact Evaluation Strategy \(2019–2026\) | World Food Programme.](#)
- 6 [Implementing Impact Evaluations at the World Bank: Guidance Note.](#)



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