# TECHNICAL NOTE

## Response of the UNICEF Evaluation Function to the COVID-19 crisis

*Effective: 30 March 2020 until UNICEF/ Host Governments roll back the COVID-19 response procedures*

The coronavirus pandemic is testing the world in unprecedented ways. There is an urgent need to reflect on **what the ongoing crisis means for the evaluation function at UNICEF**, and to achieve clarity on how we can best confront the uncertainty that lies ahead.

As UNICEF continues to work tirelessly for children and communities around the world, the evaluation function must continue to contribute to learning and accountability in this challenging time. It must also support the organization and partners to analyse the short- and long-term impacts of the crisis and provide evidence on what works to address them.

The objectives of this technical note are two-fold: 1) Outline **the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for the ongoing work** of the UNICEF evaluation function, and the **adjustments** that will be required at all levels of the organization in this context; and 2) Clarify the **role** the evaluation function should play in these challenging times, in order to contribute substantively to the organization's **emerging evidence needs** in relation to the crisis.

Given the fluid circumstances, this technical note is a 'living document' and will be updated, as needed, as the crisis unfolds.

## 1. What are the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for the UNICEF evaluation function?

Countries are being impacted by the crisis in various ways, depending on a host of factors ranging from the severity of the outbreak, the capacity of local systems to cope, and the mitigation strategies employed by governments. At this point in time, very few countries seem to be less heavily disrupted in their daily activities.

It is vital that UNICEF offices at all levels **fully comply with the precautionary measures** put in place by the organization and host governments, in order to protect ourselves, teams and consultants, our partners, and the people we serve. It is of utmost importance that the **'do no harm' principle** consistently guides our efforts across the board.

With this in mind, the following section presents general principles that offices engaged in evaluative work are **required to follow** and also outlines specific adjustments that may be required for ongoing work.

## A. Ensuring business continuity in planned and ongoing evaluative work

It is vital that the evaluation function, and the associated evidence agenda, remain '**open for business'** during the crisis. UNICEF offices, partners, other UN agencies and the public need to see UNICEF evaluation staff acting with the **renewed dedication and energy** that such crises require.

## B. Data collection and analysis – guiding principles for offices

Given the current context, data collection and related preparatory activities[1] involving direct person-to-person contact is **not expected** and should be **de-prioritized** until UNICEF and host governments declare it is safe to resume such direct contact. Moreover, offices should be guided by the following principles, depending on the stage of their evaluation/review/assessment (herewith defined as 'exercise'):

I.   If the exercise has commenced and **data collection is complete**: work should **proceed as planned**. The exception to 'business as usual' in this case would be conducting **virtual (as opposed to the usual in-person) reference group meetings and, where relevant, virtual workshops for purposes of fine-tuning recommendations**. Timelines may need to be adjusted to accommodate the virtual workshops.

II.  If the exercise has started but **data collection is incomplete or has not commenced yet**: offices should explore **alternative virtual means to gather information**, while assessing their feasibility in the particular context.


### Virtual data collection approaches and tools

In seeking alternatives to face-to-face data collection, offices are specifically encouraged to use **virtual tools**, including phone interviews and phone surveys, virtual Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and online surveys, among others. Offices are also encouraged to **innovate in the application of virtual approaches and tools**, knowing well that their experiences will shape our work going forward. A set of lessons learned on innovative methods of data gathering in 'hard to reach areas' may be of relevance and can be found here.


### Greater attention to analyzing secondary data

Furthermore, offices should make full use of pre-existing secondary data such as administrative datasets and previous survey datasets to answer some evaluation questions. Most countries have **administrative data** on health care, schooling, provision of water and social protection, among other areas. Other potential sources include **survey data** (MICS, DHS, LSS, budget surveys,

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[1] Such as pre-testing or training in groups.

school censuses), **big data**, **data from social media**, existing **geo-spatial data**, etc. Harnessing these will depend on the scope of the exercise, but such sources have the potential to offer a wealth of information (e.g. highlighting **equity aspects** through disaggregated data analysis and vulnerability analysis)

If **no valid dataset exists,** the **scope of the exercise should be revised/reduced accordingly, limited to the use of virtual approaches and tools**.

### *Desk-based syntheses/rapid reviews and related approaches*

Offices should be further guided by the **general objective of contributing to increased knowledge**, with the understanding that, in the given circumstances, this could also imply significantly changing the terms of reference (ToR) initially envisioned. Under the current constraints, evaluative work could, for instance, take the form of a **desk analysis or meta-synthesis** of past evaluations, research and studies.

In considering alternatives, offices are also encouraged to tap into the expertise of **professionals employed by think tanks and academia**, who, given the current widespread teleworking arrangements, might be more flexible and eager to contribute their expertise 'remotely' (see section 2. below).

### *De-emphasizing evaluative work in other ongoing emergencies not an option*

Evidence in support of **ongoing humanitarian response** remains a priority. Even as we step to respond to COVID-19, we should not ignore previous/other ongoing humanitarian crises such as Yemen, Syria, DR Congo, the Sahel, Venezuela and Bangladesh [Rohingya], and the pre-existing, vital evidence-generation needs that these contexts feature. The 'do no harm' guiding principle holds even in these environments, where offices should seek to apply virtual approaches for data collection (as per section above). In instances where the nature of the crisis does not allow for such approaches, and face to face engagement seems the only option, offices are required to contact their respective Regional Evaluation Advisor and the Director of Evaluation to discuss the way forward.

## C. Governance aspects

### I. Amendments to work plans and evaluation design

UNICEF staff with evaluation responsibilities at the **country office level** who, in light of the above, have made or are making adjustments to ongoing exercises, are **required to inform** their Country Representatives, Regional Evaluation Advisors (REA)s and Steering Committees accordingly. Similarly, UNICEF staff **at the regional and HQ levels** who wish to amend their work plans or evaluation designs should seek appropriate review from their supervisors and notify the Director of Evaluation in New York. Colleagues responsible for reviewing plans should **exercise the maximum flexibility** so as to support staff members to achieve the intended outcome.

II.  **Implications for existing contracts**

Staff with evaluation responsibilities are required to **discuss the way forward** with consultants who have an ongoing contract with their office. Where applicable, offices should review existing contracts, as relevant, in any of the following scenarios:

i. Downsizing of an existing contract due to a reduction in the scope of the exercise (e.g. elimination of primary data collection in the field where this is no longer possible).

ii. Producing a cost-neutral amendment by adjusting specific components of an existing contract (e.g. increased number of days for online data collection and secondary data analysis and reduced number of days for face-to-face data collection). A cost-neutral amendment may or may not lead to a (no-cost) extension.

iii. Amending an existing contract for a budget increase. While this will normally require review by the Head of Office, the scope of work will most likely have to be redefined to ensure it is accommodated within the approved budget of the section.

Depending on the level of disruption, in some countries it might be possible to pursue the 'do no harm' approach by using virtual approaches as well as engaging local experts and consultants to conduct evaluations, reviews, assessments etc. In such cases, staff responsible for evaluation should ensure that the use of national consultants will not expose them to danger. With this in mind, contracts may be amended accordingly and/or new contracts signed with national consultants. Travel by international consultants to or from countries affected by the crisis should be avoided until UNICEF and host country rules allow.

Readers of this note are further reminded that UNICEF contracts with institutions require them to exercise proper care and protection of their staff and consultants. UNICEF may not compel them to over-ride their own judgments of how to keep their personnel safe. Should there be a difference of opinion that might threaten the conduct of a vital activity, please contact your Regional Evaluation Advisor and the Evaluation Office.

III.  **Reviewing ethical approval**

Offices should review the **Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval** for guidance that may apply to the changed circumstances. It is not required to re-contact the IRB team - decisions can be made based on the clear language of the approval. Country Offices are also encouraged to seek specific guidance from their respective **Regional Evaluation Advisors or the Director of Evaluation** who may offer further clarity and support on related matters including, for instance, the need to formalize changes to **previously approved protocols**. Irrespective of prior IRB approval, cessation of evaluative activities is required if there are any serious risks of harm to subjects, communities or other evaluation personnel until that harm can be mitigated. In this context, risk of contracting COVID-19 should be considered a serious risk of harm until the authorities have declared that the risk has been eliminated or minimized.

Should cases arise whereby UNICEF advises against the conduct of evaluative activities, yet measures prescribed by national authorities do not necessarily prevent them and contractors are willing to proceed, staff are required to discuss with contractors possible strategies to limit risks and ensure that adequate protection is guaranteed (e.g. enumerator training, personal protection equipment, etc.).

For related queries, staff may also contact directly the office of the **UNICEF Senior Advisor - Ethics in Evidence Generation** at the following email address: gberman@unicef.org

### *D. Additional considerations*

Staff responsible for evaluations should remember that **it is still possible to plan for new evaluation activities** in the future and to engage in office-wide and partner-wide thinking on priorities, plans in EISI and budgets. New activities **can be initiated and carried through** the design and contracting processes, in the context of the do harm principle described above. Managers have an accountability to assure the **best use of the time** of staff and consultants. Schedules of staff and consultants should be adjusted in ways that allow them to bring the necessary evaluation evidence to strengthen the response and the broader work of UNICEF.

## 2. In what ways can the UNICEF evaluation function further help the organization during COVID-19?

The unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19 require the evaluation function to 'think outside the box', be bold, innovative and nimble. Amidst the evident constraints, there are opportunities for the evaluation function to contribute meaningfully to the improvement of the lives of children and their communities. The evaluation function at large has the appropriate skills to help meet the organization's current and emerging evidence needs in relation to COVID-19.

It is critical for the Evaluation function at all levels to **anticipate key evidence needs** that the organization may have, **steer the demand** and generate highly relevant evidence despite the current constraints. Along these lines, a key question that all staff members with evaluation responsibilities should ask themselves is: **how can evaluative work support UNICEF and partners in their response to the crisis?** In other words, what are the **key evidence needs** that offices would most likely require an adequate response to, from now?

While the financial implications of this crisis are unknown, offices are also encouraged to keep abreast of ongoing plans through **regular engagement with other sections** and **leverage additional funding** that may be coming in for the COVID-19 response, for evaluative work.
Final decisions on the appropriate approaches in evaluative work will evidently be affected by considerations around feasibility in the **operating context** and **quality**, among others[2], yet **capacity to innovate** under the current constraints will be acknowledged and supported at large.

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[2] E.g. Privacy issues.

Some **quick references and links** are included below, with further information about various evaluative approaches that could be considered by offices in the coming weeks:

> ➢ [Fly on the wall (FOTW)](#) approach: an unobtrusive way of gathering information for iterative learning and adaptive management;
> ➢ Rapid Reviews and [Evidence syntheses](#) : a rapid review is a method whereby evidence from multiple studies is identified, selected and combined usually within a constrained setting. Click for an example of a [rapid evidence synthesis](#) which can be completed within a very short timeframe to produce a review which is relevant and timely. A useful link to a rapid review guidebook can also be found [here](#).
> ➢ [Secondary data analysis](#): technological advances have increasingly allowed for large amounts of data to be collected and archived for a time as this; analysis of large **quantitative datasets** (from admin data, big data, surveys etc.) can be a viable method to adopt in a process of inquiry.

# Resource Hub

As indicated, this note is intended to be a living document. To permit a more **interactive approach** and to operate in **real-time**, the Evaluation Office is establishing a **Resource Hub** around evidence gathering and the COVID-19 emergency. A **link to access the Hub** will be shared shortly.

In addition, the **existing Evaluation Help Desk** remains open to receive any queries, at the following address: [evalhelp@unicef.org](mailto:evalhelp@unicef.org).

The Resource Hub is a vehicle to collate and share opportunities for evidence generation and discuss which approaches, methods and tools are appropriate for a given context. Through this platform, **the UNICEF evaluation community will have the opportunity to exchange ideas and approaches related to questions that may arise as they proceed in their work and support the response to the crisis**.

In addition, the Hub and the Help Desk are avenues to share ideas about the **conceptual and operational aspects** of adapting evaluative work to the current context.

UNICEF EVALUATION OFFICE
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