

## UNICEF Mongolia: findings from the Regional COVID-19 Response Real Time Assessment -- Country Office Report

27 January 2021

### **Findings Summary**

- **Adaptability:** Mongolia CO adequately adapted to COVID-19 challenges by enhancing collaboration with external, national and local partners, to address the evolving needs of target populations and of increasing coverage, despite limited number of CO staff.
- **Reaching the most disadvantaged:** Government and implementing partners as well as beneficiary communities interviewed recognize that UNICEF addressed the most vulnerable population's needs relatively satisfactorily. Yet, some group felt more assistance are needed.
- **Success & value-addition:** all contributing external stakeholders saw UNICEF's assistance as timely. Notable successes were seen in advocacy, *shock responsive social protection* and supporting flexible working arrangements for parents, support for online learning platform and educational content development. Partners see UNICEF's added value in communication messaging and information sharing, training and capacity building of government partners and the education cluster coordination.
- **Looking forward:** participating stakeholders in our data gathering suggest that UNICEF should: target more vulnerable children (including online activities and families with increased risks); strengthen monitoring of impact on target beneficiaries; scale up advocacy at higher-level and involving international expertise; work on strengthening legislative frameworks for enhanced operational collaboration with NGOs and private sectors, cluster operation and emergency preparedness.
- **Leaving No Child Behind:** the RTA survey suggests UNICEF developed a particular focus on herder migrant families, families with increased risks (such as unemployment, homeless), single-parent households, orphans and children living far away from schools, to ensure no child is left *behind* in Mongolia.

## 1. Introduction and Purpose

The UNICEF Mongolia Country Office was requested by the Regional Office (RO) to take part in the global UNICEF Real Time Assessment (RTA) exercise. The RTA is designed to assess UNICEF's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in a light and rapid manner. The RTA is being carried out across all UNICEF regions, but tailored to each region's needs. The East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region's RTA process included requesting an online survey to be completed by every UNICEF Country Office (CO) so that some early perspectives on the COVID-19 response could be gathered and learning extracted for the organisation. The Mongolia CO was one of six EAP focus country offices that the RTA produced additional data gathering through (a) desk review (carried out by the RO Evaluation section); (b) requesting Government and Implementing Partners (IPs) to complete an online survey; and finally (c) identifying a small sample of informant for Key Informant Interviews (KII). These KII were drawn from Frontline workers and beneficiary families to learn from their perspectives on the COVID-19 response and feed into the RTA analysis.

The purpose of this paper is to respond to a request from the CO for a country-specific report drawn from the RTA exercises in Mongolia. It is hoped that the report will inform country management team reflections on performance of the COVID-19 response and planning for the coming year (2021).

Please note that the surveys completed by the country office and by government and IPs asked questions on the same broad areas to try to understand progress so far and enable some basic comparisons between what the UNICEF team concluded and what others thought. However, the country office (CO) surveys were designed to be carried out globally, thus also to contribute to a greater understanding on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic across UNICEF. The surveys for government and IPs differed in that these were designed to have resonance with those informants and draw on their local perspectives. So, the questions asked were not exactly the same as those asked through the CO surveys. What is set out below draws out the CO responses to the assessment questions and compare these with those of government and IPs responses, as far as possible. In some cases, questions were asked on a 1 to 10 scaling, some asked for responses on a “drop-down” menu of options, and other questions were open and allowed space for qualitative replies from informants. Where scores for government and IPs are given these are averaged from their survey scores. With respect to these averaged scores, there would be no further comments on the scoring if there was no major outliers in scores given by different partners and government informants; had this been the case the divergence would be pulled out and described.

With a sample of eight completed surveys returned (4 Government, 3 INGO and 1 national NGO IPs) disaggregating between these responses needs to be treated with some caution and the methodology for analysis takes this point into consideration. Six Frontline Workers and five members of Affected Communities took part in Key Informant Interviews.

At the time of drafting this report, the EAP regional RTA report has been shared with country teams. Where helpful, comments are added in this report to compare findings from Mongolia and the regional report. **Please note that this Country report is based on a very limited number of data gathering points, thus conclusions presented are not claimed to be representative for the UNICEF response in the country. The conclusions are based on the limited data provided by respondents.**

## 2. Analysis and findings from the Mongolia RTA process so far

### 2.1. Adaptability: how did responses adapt to the COVID-19 challenges?

The CO reported in their survey the following as the most significant ways the office adapted its work to respond to COVID-19 from a range of options:

- Increasing the use of local solutions (e.g. procurement, supplies, consultants, local partners)
- Increasing international procurement for supplies not readily available locally [including at scale]
- Scaling up the use of digital platforms for remote programming and monitoring
- Strengthening cross-sectoral programming
- Enhancing coordination with external partners

In response to this question, the Mongolia office did not choose “*Scaling up programmes and/or supplies to reach larger numbers of affected people including the most vulnerable groups*” which was a common choice in other EAP countries, nor working in *new programmatic or new geographical areas*. This underlines the continuing focus on *upstream* working rather than diversifying into *downstream* working. This appears a practical choice when bearing in mind the CO did not have a health component, government leadership has been strong, and the size of the UNICEF country office is quite small.

However, as with the vast majority of UNICEF COs in the region, there has been a significant increase in budget and programming from the initial plan. The desk review noted that the initial Response Plan had a total budget of 880K USD, and then continued reassessment of the situation and ability of the country office to deliver led to multiple expansions of targets. The latest update of the Response Plan indicates that funding now stands at more than 3 million USD (August 2020). Funding requests have expanded, including 1.8 million USD for critical supplies, more than 2 million USD required for response to address socio-economic impact of COVID-19 notably in Education and Child Protection interventions. The desk review noted:

*As the COVID-19 preventive measures have multiple impacts on Mongolia’s economy and child well-being, UNICEF expanded its interventions in Mongolia to adapt to emerging needs of the most vulnerable children as well as those of newly identified affected groups e.g. children stranded abroad and domestic violence survivors. This includes RCCE messaging designed for children with disabilities, joint support to the Ministry of Education on remote learning, child feeding and nutrition interventions as well as supporting government for social protection interventions for vulnerable groups. These corresponds to findings of multiple studies identifying socio-economic impact of COVID-19, such as: (a) income loss for households of herders and with persons with disabilities, (b) food price increase, and (c) school closure.*

The CO team noted the **external factors** that drove these changes as: (1) the need to increase coverage / outreach of programming and delivery; (2) Increased security and access limitations directly or indirectly related to national COVID-19 prevention/mitigation mechanisms; (3) The need to address the evolving needs of populations, including vulnerable groups.

**When asked for a score on the degree of adaptability the office had adopted in response to the changing context the CO rated themselves 8 / 10.** A slightly different question was asked of partners which focused on UNICEF’s ability to scale up as needed and the average government & IP score on this was **7.4**, although one INGO IP’s score on this was very low and brought down the overall average<sup>1</sup>. However, even factoring this in, there is a reasonably closely aligning view to the CO score and a positive overall view on adaptability.

One of the most interesting aspects of the regional RTA has been assessing how different COs coped with the crisis from very different starting points – for instance in having previous experience of significant emergencies and the extent that the office was equipped to deal with one. The CO survey noted proactive steps taken to compensate for a previous lack of exposure to emergencies and limited staff capacity and is helpful to quote here.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that other scores from this agency were much more in line with other partners so the views on this particular area is an outlier. There is no commentary in their open ended question responses to offer any possible explanation on this.

*At the onset of the pandemic, Senior Management realized that the office structure is designed for a development programme and that most staff had little to no experience with emergencies. Therefore, Senior Management immediately reached out to the RO requesting and securing technical support from RO, plus an on-site capacity building mission just before the country closed its borders. This resulted in an initial comprehensive response plan, developed with the full participation of staff (programme and operations), thus enhancing the Office capacity in risk assessment, preparedness and response to COVID-19.*

The CO rated the extent that *pre-existing preparedness and contingency planning effectively informed and supported the response to COVID-19* as 7 / 10. No doubt the steps taken in the immediate pre-crisis period contributed to this assessment on preparedness despite the country team feeling inexperienced in emergencies. These proactive steps mirrored the early and decisive actions taken by the government on COVID-19 prevention measures. The incidence of COVID-19 infections in the country has remained remarkably low. The early prevention steps taken likely contributed to the largely positive views on timeliness of the response as set out in section 2.4.

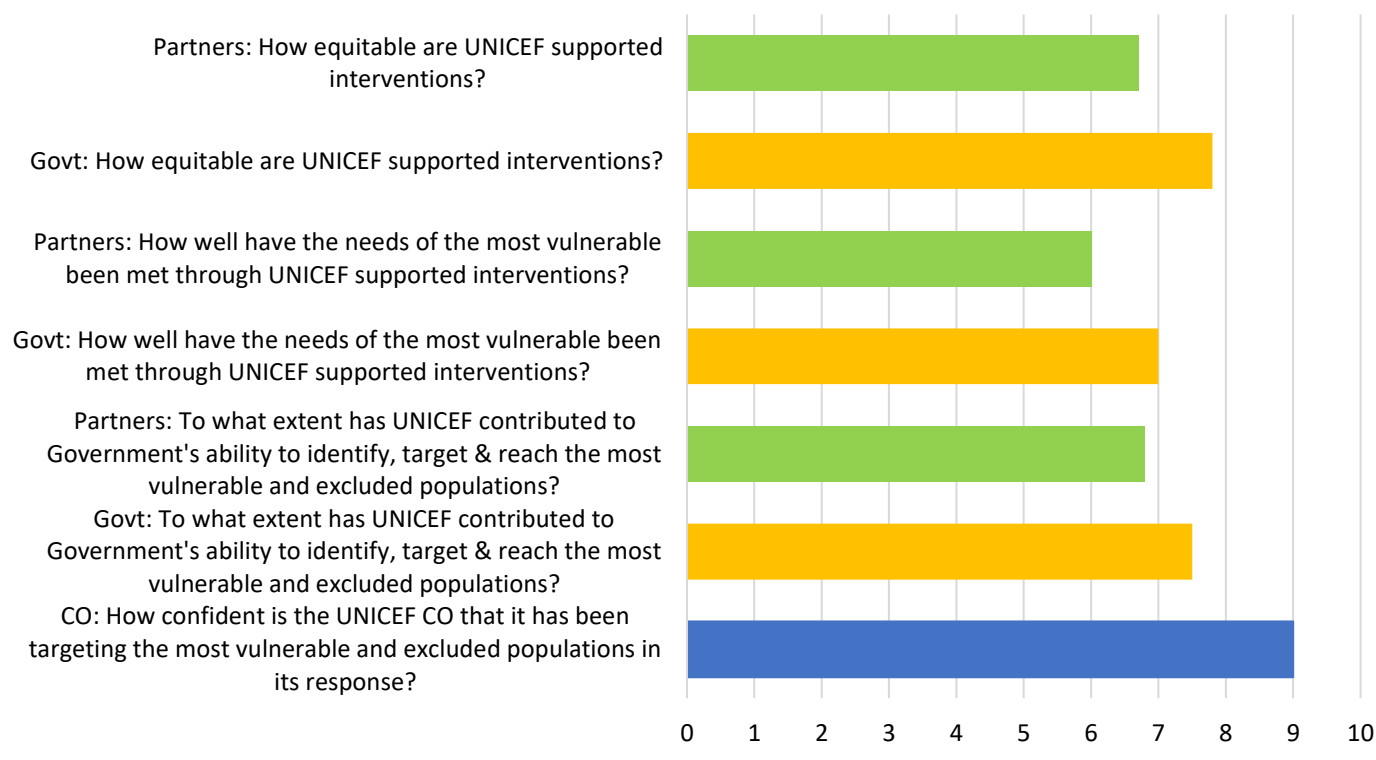
## 2.2. Equity: identifying and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable

The CO survey asked for a score on the ***level of confidence the office felt that targeting the most vulnerable had been successful and this was scored at 9 / 10***. The CO survey noted the key means undertaken to ensure the most vulnerable were reached:

- Advocacy with Government/other actors on addressing gaps in provision for particular population groups
- Commissioning additional multi-agency, multi sectoral analytical work
- Engaging with specialist agencies such as disabled people's organizations, gender specialists, etc.

Partners were asked a broader range of questions relating to equity to try to determine their perspectives on success in identifying and reaching the most vulnerable populations. The CO and average scores from the partners are shown in Figure 1. The averaged scores from the government and IPs are noticeably lower than the CO score in this area, particularly on the extent *the most vulnerable needs have been met*. As with the adaptability question above, one INGO IP (not the same one as before) was more noticeably negative in this set of questions. It was noted that scores from this partner in other question areas tended to be 2 – 3 points less than other stakeholders across the scored questions in the survey. But again – frustratingly – there is very little commentary offered in their responses to open ended questions. It is therefore impossible to say whether this partner had had a negative experience overall, or their expectations were higher than others. This may be an area that the CO would like to discuss further (or investigate) with partners and government contacts to understand what may lie beneath these scores and if there are any significant actions that could be undertaken to improve them.

**Figure 1: Identifying and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable CO score and averaged scores of Govt and IPs**

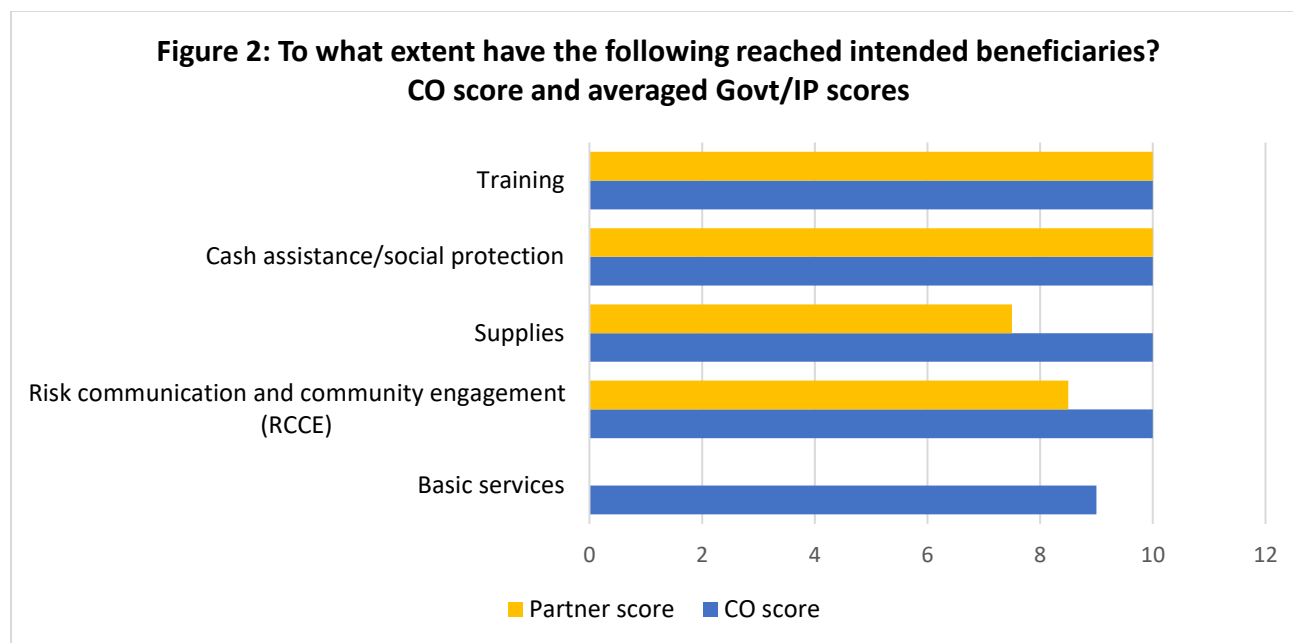


As can be seen in section 4, stakeholders provided views on those groups in danger of being left behind.

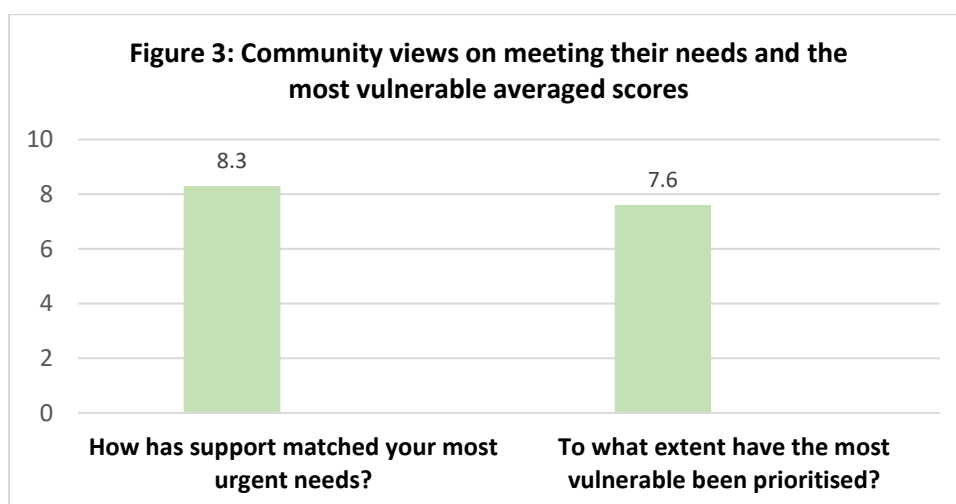
### 2.3. Reaching beneficiaries through different interventions

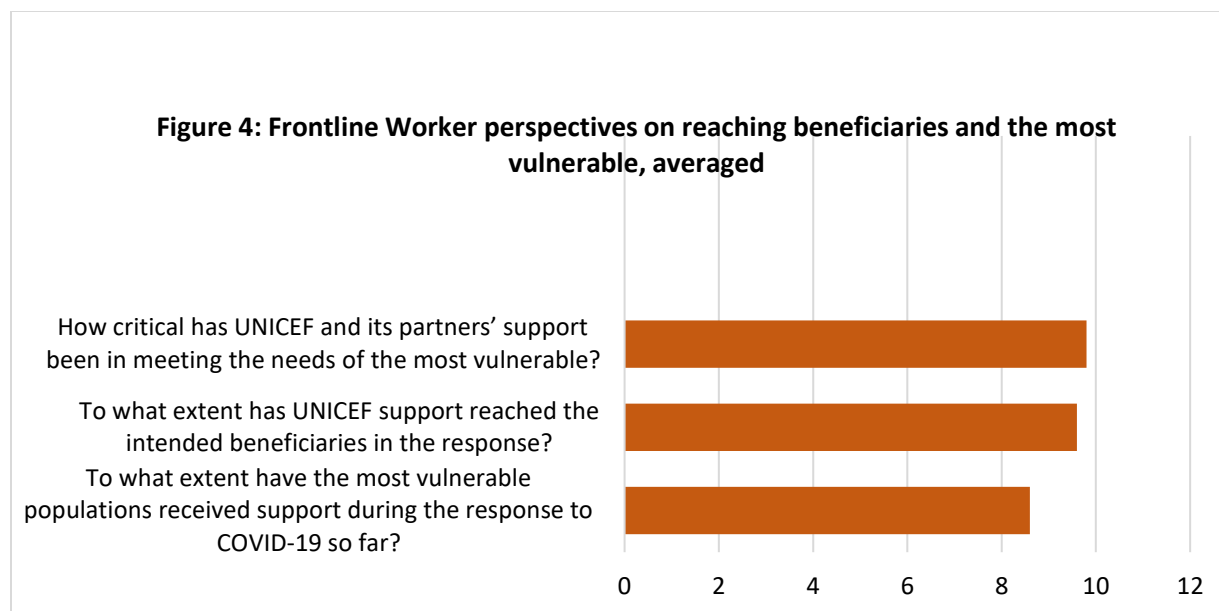
Questions were asked of both the UNICEF CO and partners in the surveys on interventions reaching beneficiaries and responses are set out in Figure 2. Please note that the Basic Services question was not included in the partner survey. In the regional report, RCCE and training were the top two performers from partner and CO views. The Mongolia feedback was different with training and cash / social protection scoring 10/10. The social protection score is no doubt related to the success noted in section 2.5 on the advocacy contribution and support to achieving the increased nation-wide cash assistance to families. Supplies were the bottom score, and this is consistent with feedback regionally, the regional report noting that there may be a connection to supply delays and timeliness influencing this score. There were no qualitative comments to shed any light on this.

For both IP and government informant groups, most respondents only gave a score for a small number of categories as these were the ones which they had received support from UNICEF on, and others did not apply. The scores for government and IPs are therefore merged.



Questions were asked of community through KII on the extent assistance had met their needs and how well the most vulnerable had been assisted and as can be seen from figure 2, informants were slightly more positive about their needs being met than how well the needs of the most vulnerable had been prioritised. This echoes the findings from government and IP informants outlined in Figure 1, above. All community informants were able to name vulnerable groups they were aware of that they felt needed more assistance (see examples in section 3). This feedback (largely positive from informants on needs of those targeted being met, but less positive on the most vulnerable being reached) is consistent with patterns across the region captured in the EAP RTA. The same pattern emerges in the feedback from frontline workers, as can be seen in Figure 4, below.





#### Frontline Worker views on reaching the most vulnerable

**FLW (teacher):** *I gave this 10 because we really think that UNICEF reached all those in need that were identified during consultations. The school year commenced at the end of August, teachers reflected on the response by UNICEF and concluded the most vulnerable were reached. Most at risk were reached ... according to a risk analysis done by the school.*

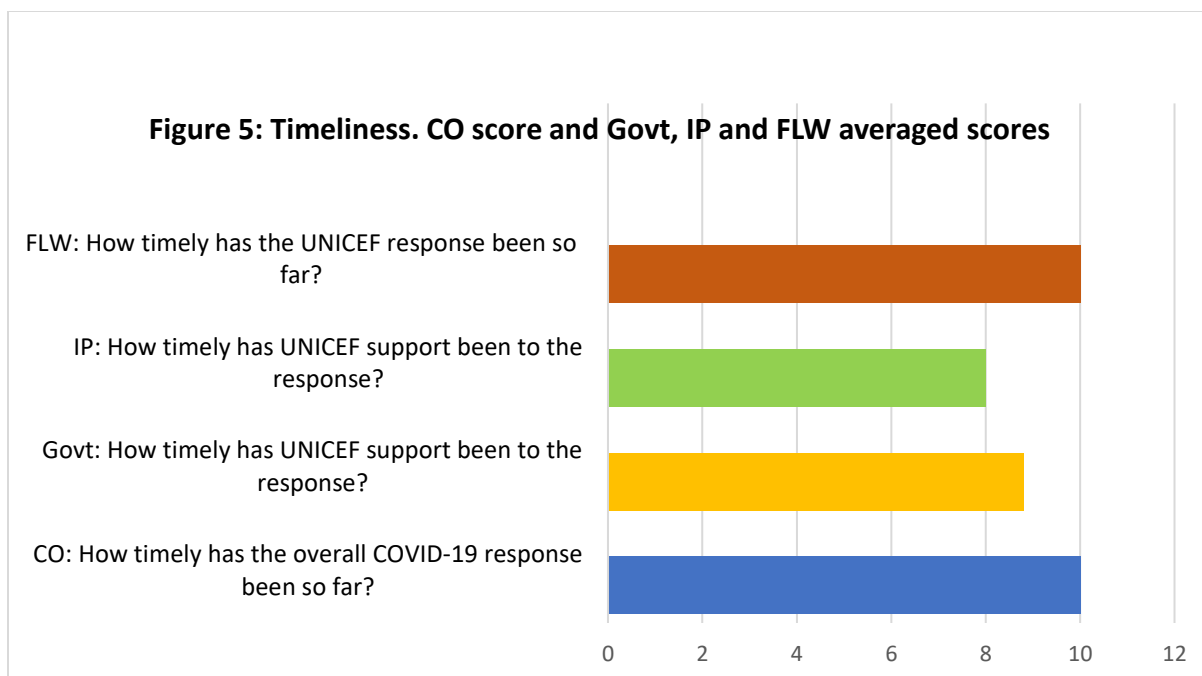
**FLW (protection shelter) 7.** *Not reaching sufficiently the most vulnerable ones. Although [UNICEF] tried to reach out the most vulnerable, since there is limited capacity (financial and human resource) many people are left behind.*

Finally, on being asked how critical UNICEF and partner's contributions have been to meeting needs, this scored very highly (again, consistent with regional findings). One FLW commented *"I gave this 10/10 because there has been support from other organizations...which had exclusion-inclusion errors, while UNICEF was most relevant as it aimed at families who lost jobs, and income affected families."*

## 2.4. Timeliness

On timeliness a similar question was asked of the UNICEF country office, partners and frontline workers. As can be seen from figure 5 the CO and front line workers had assessed the overall timeliness of the response as 10 out of 10. Government and IPs were asked a more focused question on the UNICEF contribution. There were no significant differences between government/IP views and CO on score on the matter of timeliness.

Frontline workers were very positive on this with all five informants scoring this as 10 out of 10. Neither government/IP nor frontline workers provided comments in open-ended questions that gave any further perspectives on why these scores were given. One Community KII informant regarded timeliness as "somewhat timely" with all others choosing "very timely" with one informant saying *"Yes, very timely, good follow up and assistance, guidance was very clear, good communication."*



As can be seen from the table below the CO survey asked the office to identify the main factors that helped and hindered timeliness and the response from the team is set out in the table below.

<b>Timeliness: Enabling factors</b>	<b>Timeliness: Hindering factors</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Government’s recognition of the epidemic as an emergency, and urgent need to provide support</li> <li>• L3 SSOPs and the simplification of procedures (that enabled the Country Office to come up with e.g. new partners/redesign of current IPs, procurement of supplies, etc.)</li> <li>• Technical support provided by RO and HQ</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Late delivery of supplies</li> </ul>

## 2.5. Success and value addition: particular successes in the response

The CO provided detailed feedback on this point in their survey response – much of which is extracted and presented in this section.

- A major stand-out achievement has been in advocacy for the provision of services to the most vulnerable children by the Government and development partners through **social protection measures**. In March 2020, UNICEF advocated with government for **shock responsive social protection** to provide extra cash assistance to children by topping up the child grant programme. This was adopted, resulting in extra cash to **all 1.3 million children in Mongolia** from April till



December 2020<sup>2</sup>. By the end of the year, UNICEF will have **leveraged** USD 330 million, mostly from state budget, with contributions from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Initial data from analysis done by ADB show that the cash transfers have made a huge positive difference, avoiding many households falling into poverty because of COVID. This allowance was granted for a lengthy time period (9 months), and is being sustained into the coming year

- UNICEF Mongolia took the lead globally to **advocate for flexible working arrangements** for parents to enable them take care of their children when the schools were shut down (January to August). For the first time in the country, the government of Mongolia and a number of private sector companies have now started to adopt such practices and learn from the initial experiences. UNICEF staff were well positioned to advocate for flexible working arrangements because they have been practicing it themselves for a number of years
- UNICEF took the lead to support the government with developing its **e-learning platform and online learning contents, translating contents in ethnic languages, and increase the accessibility for children with disabilities**. In parallel, UNICEF also initiated and supported the development and implementation of Mongolia's **Back-to-School** plans
- **Technical assistance and capacity building** resulted in a better coordination of the response, by the clusters and humanitarian team. It is also worth noting the active participation in the assessments of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 and the UN socio-economic response to COVID-19
- The well-established **technical expertise** of UNICEF in communication hugely contributed to the success of Mongolia in not having community transmission of the virus to date

**IPs and government informants** were asked *"In your view, what is UNICEF's particular **added value** to the COVID-19 response in the country?"*

**Government informant views** on this were:

- Assessments done on **distance learning** and the **psychosocial situation** of children and parents served as a strong basis to successfully start the academic year of 2020-2021
- UNICEF is giving a big contribution to apply for **COVAX and IEC activities**
- UNICEF's rapid response with **communication messages; online training** on psychosocial support; **capacity building** of public servants working with children and families; and overall **technical support** have been crucial

**Partners' views:**

- The **information sharing** of UNICEF is value added to the COVID-19 response in the country
- Input in development of the **Education sector Contingency plan** for communicable diseases; Technical and financial assistance to carry out a study (distance learning); active engagement and co-leading of the Education cluster
- **Fast resource mobilization; clearly defined target groups**

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<sup>2</sup> As of 19 November, it has been confirmed that the amount will be increased, and the allowance extended to mid-2021

### 3. Looking ahead

A final set of questions asked open ended questions of both the CO and partners in surveys and KII informants on what they would recommend UNICEF focused on in future. The table captures these responses and groups “More of”, “Less of”, “Do Differently” and “New Areas of Work” responses under sub-headings to allow a read-across and compare CO and stakeholder views.

	UNICEF CO survey	Government & IP survey	KIIs
More of?	<b>Strategy</b> <b>Increasingly integrate</b> the COVID-response/recovery into the regular programme We need to continue to work on COVID and other emergency preparedness and response, including (their respective) business continuity <b>Increasingly understand</b> and address medium to long term consequences for children (losses in education, mental health issues because of increased domestic violence) <b>Leveraging</b> existing human resources, including domestic and international expertise	<b>Strategy</b> Consider the long-term sustainability of the programs  To have more scaled advocacy, bringing international expertise and building on good international practices, with good customization to the country context.	<b>Strategy</b> Target more vulnerable kids, .... Alcohol & unemployment in families  Online crimes and online activity are key topics to focus on
	<b>Programme sectors</b>	<b>Programme sectors</b> <b>Support development</b> of variety of digital learning and open learning sources so the learning processes will continue at any time under any circumstances <b>Team-up</b> with the Government in building the social work capacity to provide supervision to the managing the child protection cases <b>Support IEC</b> activities for target groups	<b>Programme sectors</b> <b>Education / Online teaching</b> is challenging because not all teachers have computers, or software needed, or internet access x3 <b>There has been</b> lots of messages from government agencies, on wearing masks for example, but people are not wearing masks, need to improve messaging and raising awareness <b>Trainings for parents</b> and <b>Workshops</b> are needed x2
	<b>Partnerships</b> (with NGO, Aid and UN agencies) will enhance .... UNICEF capacity and reach	<b>Partnerships:</b> Collaborating with partners	
	<b>Visibility of the UNICEF response, especially when the services are channelled through the Government</b> (national and local level). This implies the donor recognition and community engagement as well and awareness	<b>Monitoring how the programme interventions are actually benefitting</b> the target group/s	

	UNICEF CO survey	Government & IP survey	KIIs
<b>Less of?</b>	Less involvement in <b>procurement</b> (except for <b>COVAX</b> related procurement) Less <b>stand-alone COVID risk communications</b> (instead, more integrated communication messages combining e.g. COVID, flu, air pollution) Less <b>extended work time requirements</b> for UNICEF staff	<b>Inflexibility</b>	
<b>Do differently?</b>	<b>Adaptation</b> as situation evolves	<b>Engage INGOs more</b> in their interventions in the Ministry's <b>policy development</b> and implementation of activities <b>More direct communication</b> Expansion of the <b>education cluster</b> , formalization of and <b>strengthening the legislative framework</b> for cluster operations is required.	
<b>Possible new areas of work?</b>	<b>Online learning platforms</b> to be more developed, not only for COVID related situations but also other situations that the country may be facing for instance those <b>linked to extreme weather - Dzuds<sup>3</sup></b>	Health Education Further support the strengthening of <b>the legislative framework allowing open and collaborative operations of the government</b> , NGOs, international organizations and private sector in <b>stronger preparedness to risks and emergencies</b> . Supply of drug and medicine <b>More higher-level advocacy</b> for child friendly community and governance approach.	Most comments made relating to this are captured under Leaving No Child Behind as set out below

#### 4. How to ensure we are Leaving no Child Behind (LNCB)?

In the **CO survey**, a broad question was asked – *Contexts and vulnerabilities may have changed in the short/medium term due to COVID-19. What action(s) can the Country Office take to adjust plans and implementation in line with any new vulnerability analysis and the commitment to Leave No Child Behind?* The CO noted it has undertaken a risk assessment and re-prioritization of the programme based on the situation at mid-year. This resulted in adjusted plans at that time. The assessment of the situation is on-going through different surveys commissioned, including *MICS Plus* that is being launched now. Results are shared and discussed with partners, and to make them accessible, an online platform is being developed jointly with the UNCT. The response plans are constantly updated, taking into account new vulnerabilities.

<sup>3</sup> A Mongolian term for a particularly severe winter in which large numbers of livestock die through cold and starvation due to being unable to graze, causing food and economic insecurity for affected communities

**Government/IP survey and KII Informants** were asked a more focused question: “Which groups are now in most danger of being ‘left behind’ and are the most vulnerable?” This question brought quite a wide-ranging set of responses. These included needs relating to location, parents’ livelihoods and so on and feedback is grouped below under these headings. In this case government and IP views are presented separately.

Issues related to –	Government	IPs	Frontline workers
<b>Location</b>	Children in <b>rural areas</b>	<b>Urban</b> suburbs	Children’s <b>schools are very distant</b> from their homes, they require more attention
<b>Livelihood of parents/carers</b>		<b>Herding families</b> <b>Herder migrant</b> communities	Children from families experiencing <b>unemployment</b> x2 Children from <b>homeless</b> families, need a more targeted approach
<b>Children at risk or with special needs</b>		Children affected by (suffering from) <b>child protection cases</b> Children with <b>Disabilities</b> x2	During lockdowns and recession there is <b>violence</b> from parents Children <b>neglected</b> by parents The <b>single-parent</b> households, as well as <b>orphans</b> that live with other relatives. <i>They are very neglected. They need more love and care</i>
<b>Particular age groups</b>		<b>2-4-year</b> olds left out of pre-school	<b>Adolescents</b> x2
<b>Other comments</b>	Although at different points of time, coming up with the specific recommendations and operational modalities to address specific needs of the ones who are <b>at the risk of being left behind was systematized</b> <b>If assessment is done properly</b> it is possible to reach all the targeted groups		<b>Big families</b> with more than 4 children

## Desk Review

As part of the RTA process, a desk review has been developed for Mongolia. The Mongolia Country Office has reviewed and provided feedback on the Desk Review. The Desk Review is presented as Annex One.

## Limitations

The limitations of this country specific report and the RTA were noted at the beginning of this report. It is important to reiterate them here. Specifically, that this Country report is based on a very limited number of data gathering points, thus conclusions presented are not claimed to be representative for the UNICEF response in the country. The conclusions are based on the limited data provided by respondents.

Due to the methodology implemented to ensure a light and rapid process; some positive biases in selection should be considered. For additional limitation of the methodology, please refer to the main report.

## Version Tracker

Previous version was shared with CO on 15 December 2020

## Annex One: Desk Review



Final Mongolia  
Desk Review\_RTA\_C