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Evaluation of UNICEF's Humanitarian Response to the Syria Crisis (2012 - 2015)

The civil unrest that began in the Syrian Arab Republic in March 2011 marked the advent of one of the largest humanitarian crises ever recorded. As part of its international assistance, UNICEF mounted a complex large-scale response operation to support the delivery of programmes focused on meeting the needs to crisis-affected children in the Syrian Arab Republic and its neighbouring countries. This brief summarizes the evaluation of that effort.

Over the past five years, the world has witnessed the Syrian Arab Republic fall into a lethal spiral of violence and conflict that has triggered a massive humanitarian crisis. By the end of 2015, an estimated 13.5 million people, including 6 million children, were in need of humanitarian assistance. Of those affected, 4.6 million were registered as refugees in neighbouring countries, primarily in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

As the crisis began to deepen, UNICEF joined the international effort to reach affected populations with

humanitarian assistance by mounting a complex, large-scale operation.

In order to document this work and assess how well the organization was able to respond to the crisis, UNICEF's Evaluation Office commissioned an evaluation of UNICEF's work in the sub-region. The evaluation covered UNICEF's operational activities in the Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey from 2012 – 2015.

UNICEF's Response

The response (and the evaluation) focused on four UNICEF 'flagship' programmes: child protection, education, health and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

Key areas for child protection varied by country but included emergency psychosocial support, case management and advocacy in the Syrian Arab Republic, the development of laws and the establishment of operating procedures in Jordan and Lebanon, and, the establishment of child-friendly spaces in Turkey. Efforts in education also varied by country but included advocacy, facilitating two shifts of school attendance for students, certification for both camp and non-camp settings and the establishment of non-formal education services in camps.

In health, the initial focus was on vaccination against measles. Then, after an outbreak of polio in the Syrian Arab Republic, polio vaccination was prioritized. Activities in WASH included water supply, wastewater management, infrastructure repair and rehabilitation.

Findings and Conclusions

Despite the difficult operating environment and the limitations (please see Box 1 for more details), *UNICEF was substantially able to deliver on its core objectives*. The response was slow to start in 2012, due to an underestimation of the scope and complexity of the Syrian crisis. Yet, the evaluation found that the organization invested significantly in implementing its programmes, building its capacity and improving its performance. In 2013 and 2014 the response was significantly scaled-up.

However, it was unclear whether these efforts addressed the priority locations and needs of the affected population. This was due to a lack of a clear UNICEF strategy based on needs assessment and systematic results monitoring.

Box 1: Contextual Limitations

The evaluation's conclusions should be considered within the contextual limitations impacting the humanitarian response in the Syrian Arab Republic and the sub-region, many of which are beyond UNICEF's control. These contextual aspects differ by country, but include:

- ⇒ The complex political nature of the crisis, which led to constantly changing parameters for the response (e.g. in terms of the scale and scope of the crisis and the constant movement of battlefronts and affected populations).
- ⇒ The role of governments, which impacted the speed of UNICEF's response and its operating space, particularly with regard to the operations inside the Syrian Arab Republic.
- ⇒ Security issues leading to safety risks for UNICEF and implementing partner staff.
- ⇒ The protracted nature of the crisis that impacted countries' ability to provide assistance.

Role and Strategy

The evaluation found that UNICEF's clear mandate ensured that partners had a good understanding of UNICEF's role.

The evaluation found little evidence of an overarching UNICEF-specific rationale that connected the sector responses, informed programming and advocacy choices or that was based on UNICEF's organizational capacity. Furthermore, the programming and advocacy choices could have been improved based on contextual analysis, systematic needs and vulnerability assessments. This led to programme choices that were largely opportunity-based and reactive.

There was a division in opinion on what UNICEF's core role going forward should be. The coordination and policy role is anticipated to become even more important in the future, given the anticipated continued rise in needs and funding requirements, which means that entire sectors will be required to do more with less funding.

Programme Response

By focusing its programme efforts, UNICEF was able to develop an effective response. For WASH (water supply) and health (immunization), this contributed to the absence of disease, no outbreaks in camps and bringing polio back under control. Child protection and education were initially a bigger challenge in terms of quality of the response, the speed of the response, and the number of children assisted.

The evaluation found that UNICEF's initial ability to respond was limited by a lack of preparedness and an absence of a clear UNICEF-specific strategy, as well as an inability to inform programmes actively with situational analysis. As a result, the effectiveness, relevance and coverage of the response were, to some extent, hampered.

Not all programmes met their objectives in 2012 and 2013. This was, in part, due to a limited understanding of the required emergency response capacity and resulted in programme targets that were based on UNICEF's mandate; specifically, targets were based on what it *should* do rather than on what it *could* do. Planning targets were adjusted in 2014 to become more achievable and proportionate to UNICEF's capacity.

Engagement with Others

The evaluation showed that UNICEF's existing working relations with national and local authorities were a significant factor in aiding the effectiveness of the response, while government restrictions severely hindered the response in the Syrian Arab Republic. These restrictions made it difficult to assess needs and to respond consistently to all parts of the country. UNICEF has since developed new approaches, tools and systems to mitigate the impact of these limitations.

At the sub-regional level, UNICEF took a key role in coordinating across sectors with other organizations on plans, approaches, key issues and messages. UNICEF's engagement with others has largely enhanced humanitarian performance in the sub-region and UNICEF's role in leading or co-leading sector working groups increased overall sector efficiency. However, attention is required for the mapping, selection and management of implementing partners, better engagement with affected populations and working with non-state entities.

Internal Management and Process

The effectiveness of the response was reduced by a lack of clear understanding of what to do in a humanitarian crisis with a strong protection dimension

Box 2: Assessment of UNICEF's Response by Key Evaluation Criteria

- ⇒ UNICEF programme delivery incrementally became largely **effective**. Some sectoral interventions were mutually reinforcing, providing examples of good practice.
- ⇒ Programme design and implementation were not adequately informed by situational analysis or needs assessment and monitoring, but became incrementally more relevant through 'learning by doing'.
- ⇒ **Coverage** of the response was significant, but programme interventions were not systematically linked to overall needs and vulnerability, or to UNICEF capacity. In addition, it took time to scale up and not all programmes met their objectives and coverage targets.
- ⇒ Due to limited cost data related to impact, it is not possible to rigorously determine how well UNICEF used its resources and therefore the **efficiency** of the response. Aspects of UNICEF's internal management and processes limited operational efficiency.
- ⇒ Guidance was available but was not always applied, widely disseminated or contextualized, somewhat limiting the **coherence** of the response.

which extended the decision-making process.

The Simplified Standard Operating Procedures, which UNICEF employs for emergencies of this nature, were initially appropriate to context but not consistently applied, which hindered efficiency. As the crisis became protracted, the decision to rely on these procedures, which emphasize speed over quality, became less suitable and reduced the effectiveness of the response.

The coverage and efficiency of the response were also hindered by an initial shortage of staff with emergency and supply capacity in the sub-region. This contributed to delayed programming and led to an extended period of surge deployments.

UNICEF established the 'Syria Hub', a sub-regional management and support unit dedicated to coordination, planning, monitoring, reporting, communications, sharing of human resources, fundraising (for programmes, supply and human resources) and financial transactions. Roles and accountabilities of UNICEF Headquarters, the regional office, country offices and this hub were initially unclear. Internal interaction and communication was limited which reduced the efficiency of the response.

Overall, the evaluation found that internal management and process issues presented the most significant areas for improvement.

Box 3: Key Recommendations

- ⇒ Develop an overarching sub-regional UNICEF strategy, based on comprehensive needs assessment and situation analysis (including risk analysis and conflict analysis) aimed at strengthening the coherence and consistency of the overall response, and linked to UNICEF's global priorities and responsibilities. This should include, for each country office, a long-term, country specific approach.
- ⇒ Clarify the future roles and accountabilities of Headquarters, MENARO/Syria Hub and country offices, including lines of communication, and provide appropriate guidance through updated standard operating procedures.
- ⇒ Optimize the selection and management of implementing partners.
- ⇒ Develop a systematic approach to information sharing, feedback and accountability mechanisms for the affected population and integrate these into country plans, programme proposals and monitoring and evaluation processes.
- ⇒ Develop UNICEF-specific guidance for measuring the efficiency of programming and operational support that is contextualized for the crisis.
- ⇒ At the global level, taking the lessons of the Syria crisis into account, develop key guidance, tools and the knowledge base needed to carry out humanitarian response activities in similar contexts (i.e. complex, multi-country, protracted emergencies, driven by conflict, featuring urban and camp settings and large-scale population displacement). Follow through to make such guidance widely available, accessible, known and understood.



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This brief is based on the Evaluation UNICEF's Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Crisis which can be downloaded from https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_91062.html. The purpose of this brief is to facilitate the exchange of knowledge between UNICEF and its partners. The contents of the evaluation reports, and consequently this brief, do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of UNICEF. For more information, please contact the UNICEF Evaluation Office (evalhelp@unicef.org).