



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
9 April 2025

Original: English

For decision

United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

Annual session 2025

10–13 June 2025

Item 8 of the provisional agenda*

Update on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Executive Board decision 2024/9, which, in paragraph 6, “requests UNICEF to continue to update the Executive Board on how the organization is advancing its various efforts to effectively prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse, and decides to include this as a recurring item, for decision, at the annual session.”

The report provides a progress update on the work of UNICEF in advancing its efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. The report frames the updates on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse as part of advancing safeguarding and as part of the strengthened risk management enterprise approach for UNICEF.

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

* [E/ICEF/2025/11](#).



I. Overview

1. UNICEF is committed to safeguarding. The UNICEF Policy on Safeguarding of 4 March 2024 defines safeguarding as the set of actions to “prevent and reduce the risk of harm to all persons as a result of their contact with UNICEF or the work of the organization.” Safeguarding benefits everyone who comes into contact with UNICEF, and everyone at UNICEF, regardless of their role, has safeguarding responsibilities. It further reiterates that all UNICEF staff and affiliated personnel, in both their personal and professional lives, are prohibited from attempting, soliciting, encouraging, assisting or engaging in acts that may cause harm to individuals. This includes, but is not limited to, any acts involving sexual exploitation and abuse; any sexual relationship between those providing assistance and protection and a person benefiting from such assistance; and sexual activity with children. It thus reaffirms the UNICEF commitments to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse under the Secretary-General’s bulletin [ST/SGB/2003/13](#) and the six core principles relating to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

2. The UNICEF strategy to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse has five pillars: accountability and prevention, reporting, victim/survivor assistance, investigations and sanctions, and partnerships. UNICEF has aligned its Strategic Plan indicators with the strategy to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse, focusing on strengthening of systems for prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse and scaling-up of safe and accessible reporting channels for children and adults. These indicators are fully embedded in country programme monitoring and reporting. In 2024, progress against these indicators reflected the strengthening of relevant systems at UNICEF and with its implementing partners. The present report contains updates against these indicators and responds to Executive Board decision 2024/09 from its annual session of 2024.

3. Safeguarding, inclusive of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, is part of the way that UNICEF manages risks at different levels. As noted in a recent update to the Board ([E/ICEF/2024/8](#)), UNICEF is strengthening its enterprise risk management by adopting an integrated approach to risk management at different levels of the organization that fosters better coordination between different areas of programmatic/strategic, operational, contextual and institutional risks.

4. Considering the above, UNICEF risk-based decision-making and organizational learning contribute to enhancing the effectiveness and achievement of results of UNICEF and its implementing partners in terms of realizing the rights and improving the lives of every child. In 2024, 87 per cent of country offices that reported protection from risks related to sexual exploitation and abuse and environmental and social standards met organizational benchmarks to address safeguarding risks. Additional efforts will be made to strengthen country offices’ capacities on risk-based decision-making and risk screening, as part of the UNICEF integrated strategy on risk management.

5. UNICEF continues to invest in ensuring that all staff and affiliated personnel are aware of the prohibited actions and expected practices through information dissemination, training and awareness-raising and by making prevention of safeguarding harms, inclusive of sexual exploitation and abuse, part of the organizational culture.

6. Complaints and feedback management is integral to programme monitoring and risk management. Programme quality is improved by ensuring that feedback informs decision-making and improvements. UNICEF aims to apply a structured, standardized and risk-based approach, so that all complaints and feedback – including those of sexual exploitation and abuse – from all programme stakeholders are timely

and securely received, acknowledged, categorized, escalated, acted upon, analysed and closed. Providing safe, accessible and effective channels for complaints and feedback remains a priority. These channels must be based on the needs and preferences of various programme stakeholders, particularly vulnerable groups. The UNICEF approach to complaints and feedback management aims to enable timely and high-quality management of complaints and feedback by prioritizing assistance for victims/survivors, especially in cases of harm to individuals and communities.

7. As part of this broader vision on the management of complaints and feedback, UNICEF continued its efforts to ensure that specific reporting mechanisms for sexual exploitation and abuse are safe, accessible and survivor-centred. In 2024, country offices reported that an estimated 79.4 million children and adults had access to safe and accessible sexual exploitation and abuse reporting channels – a 61 per cent increase from 49.2 million in 2022. The number of UNICEF-related allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse reported to the United Nations Secretary-General increased from 45 in 2022 to 60 in 2023 and 111 in 2024. While this upward trend suggests growing awareness and trust in reporting mechanisms and we expect that the numbers will increase, underreporting of sexual exploitation and abuse is a systematic challenge across the United Nations system. Addressing the latter and strengthening prevention and response mechanisms remain critical priorities, since persistent barriers to reporting continue to hinder the identification of cases.

8. UNICEF ensured that every survivor who came forward to UNICEF with an allegation of sexual exploitation and abuse was provided with timely and high-quality support and services. UNICEF also assisted child victims of sexual exploitation and abuse referred to UNICEF by other United Nations entities, in line with its accountabilities as the provider of last resort. UNICEF provided assistance to survivors through its regular child protection and gender-based violence programming, including psychosocial support, medical assistance, education support for children, and support for survivors during and after investigations. Additionally, UNICEF efforts helped expand access to survivor-centred assistance across the inter-agency system, through technical support and trainings on the United Nations protocol on the provision of assistance to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse (Victims Assistance Protocol) for United Nations country teams and humanitarian country teams in 20 countries to date, including Cameroon, Chad, Pakistan, Syria and Ukraine who were provided with training in 2024. As a result of these efforts, an increased number of countries now have inter-agency procedures for the provision of victim assistance that are aligned with the Protocol standards.

9. In 2024, UNICEF significantly strengthened its systems for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, with more countries reaching the highest level of system maturity by ensuring all core components – action plans, reporting mechanisms, quality victim/survivor assistance and referral procedures, and implementing partner capacity-building – were in place. Globally, 78 per cent of 129 country offices had established sexual exploitation and abuse systems, up from 56 per cent in 2023. This 40 per cent increase from 72 to 101 country offices surpassed the 2024 target. Eight countries fully rolled out their systems, meeting all criteria for the first time. To sustain and expand progress, UNICEF is enhancing support for survivors by strengthening assistance systems, improving referral mechanisms and advocating for sustainable funding. In 2025, UNICEF will continue focusing on coordinated, system-wide victim support while fostering partnerships with local organizations to ensure responses are comprehensive and accountable. UNICEF significantly contributes to strengthening inter-agency efforts on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in order to deliver joint commitments. This includes leading work on several commitments within the IASC Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment Vision and Strategy for 2022–2026.

UNICEF actively participates in: (a) the United Nations Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Working Group; (b) the Implementing Partner Protocol Working Group; (c) the Protection Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Training Working Group; (d) the Commercial Partners on Protection Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Harassment Working Group; and (e) the Sexual Harassment Working Group, contributing to broader United Nations initiatives under the leadership of the Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Through these efforts, UNICEF plays a key role in advancing standard-setting across the United Nations and the IASC, contributes to strengthening safeguarding, inclusive of sexual exploitation and abuse, victim/survivor-centred assistance system-wide, and leads data-driven tracking of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse results in countries with humanitarian responses.

10. UNICEF continued delivering on its commitment to reinforce accountability and address impunity for sexual exploitation and abuse through addressing cases in a high-quality and timely manner by adopting the victim/survivor-centred approach. This involved the rapid escalation and reporting of cases for assessment and investigation to the UNICEF Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI), and follow-up to provide appropriate services and support to the survivor. In 2024, OIAI received and registered 861 new cases, including 329 concerning alleged misconduct by UNICEF staff members and 360 concerning alleged misconduct by implementing partners. Of the new cases, sexual exploitation and abuse was the second-largest category (19 per cent), following fraud involving misuse of programme funds by third parties. From 1 January to 31 December 2024, UNICEF added 111 sexual exploitation and abuse allegations in the iReport tracker. The 111 cases concerned a total of 131 victims/survivors and 117 perpetrators – 18 involving UNICEF personnel and 93 involving personnel of implementing partners (compared with 5 cases involving UNICEF personnel and 48 involving personnel of implementing partners in 2023). Cases pertaining to implementing partner personnel, however, are not directly subject to UNICEF disciplinary processes. One personnel member was found to have committed sexual exploitation and abuse in 2024; this involved an allegation received in 2023, where OIAI's investigation and the resulting disciplinary process concluded in 2024. The individual received a sanction of dismissal.

11. Implementing partners and vendors are usually the primary interface between UNICEF and local communities. UNICEF, therefore, continues to reinforce its efforts to ensure that the organizations it works with have adequate policies and mechanisms to protect the communities we serve from safeguarding risks, including sexual exploitation and abuse. In line with the IASC Harmonized Implementation Tool on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacity, all the approximately 2,300 active civil society organizations partnering with UNICEF have been assessed in relation to their capacity to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. While the majority (84 per cent) have adequate systems in place with a “full capacity” rating, ensuring that appropriate capacity-strengthening approaches and resources are in place to support implementing partner organizations remains a key priority for UNICEF. In line with its 2024 Policy on Safeguarding, UNICEF – through its training materials and resources – expanded its approach to strengthen implementing partners' capacities beyond sexual exploitation and abuse to include other types of safeguarding harm. In line with the above, UNICEF incorporated safeguarding requirements and a risk-based approach into the vendor's contracting cycle and developed a resource package on Safeguarding in Supply Resource, outlining the requirements for identifying and managing safeguarding risks in relevant procurement processes. In 2025, this workstream will also integrate the environmental and social standards requirements, for a more coordinated approach.

II. Introduction

12. In its decision 2024/9, the Executive Board requested that UNICEF provide it with an update at the annual session of 2025, for decision, on how the organization is preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse. The Board also requested that UNICEF continue taking action to ensure a victim/survivor-centred, system-wide and coherent approach to preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, and that the organization continue fostering an inclusive and respectful organizational culture where all personnel are empowered and encouraged to report sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment and are protected against retaliation. The Executive Board also asked UNICEF to consistently use the iReport Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Tracker for allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse. Furthermore, the Executive Board asked UNICEF to increase its system-wide collaboration efforts on prevention, protection and response, including through joint assessments/capacity-building of implementing partners and community engagement. Additionally, UNICEF continues to actively work to implement past recommendations of the Executive Board, including the 2023/10 decision that requested that UNICEF improve its vetting practices and consider piloting the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme.

13. The present document is being submitted to the Executive Board in fulfilment of those requests. It contains an update on progress made since the annual session of 2024 in pursuance of the UNICEF strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment; the 2024 Policy on Safeguarding; indicators of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025; and common benchmarks as agreed at the inter-agency level.

14. This report complements the UNICEF report on efforts to improve organizational culture and diversity ([E/ICEF/2024/15](#)).

III. Update on progress in implementing the UNICEF strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment

15. The UNICEF 2019 strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment describes the organization's comprehensive approach. The strategy contains five elements:

- (a) An organizational culture of zero tolerance built through accountability, prevention and gender equality;
- (b) Reporting mechanisms that are safe and trusted;
- (c) Investigations and sanctions that are swift and credible;
- (d) A quality response that is survivor-centred;
- (e) Engaging implementing partners in the fight against sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

16. As noted in previous reports to the Executive Board, UNICEF has aligned its Strategic Plan indicators with these elements of its strategy to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

17. The results against the indicators and benchmarks presented in this report reflect significant progress that UNICEF achieved in 2024 towards strengthening its systems for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. This report focuses on the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse of individuals external to UNICEF.

Internal workplace issues, including sexual harassment and organizational culture, are not the focus of this report but are addressed separately in the update on organizational culture and diversity (E/ICEF/2024/15). However, recognizing (a) the importance of the internal organizational culture to influence and support UNICEF work on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse; and (b) the criticality of preventing and responding to sexual harassment internally, a summary of relevant actions is included in this report.

A. Sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment reporting mechanisms are safe, accessible and survivor-centred

18. The benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

19. Safe, accessible and gender- and child-sensitive mechanisms for reporting sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment are in place and are victim/survivor-centred;

20. Community engagement and awareness-raising on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse is carried out in each community receiving and/or affected by United Nations assistance.

21. UNICEF is currently developing a harmonized and risk-based approach to complaints and feedback management, aimed at fostering alignment across existing complaints and feedback mechanisms while providing guidance for any offices that are still in the process of establishing one. Ensuring safe, accessible and effective channels for complaints and feedback remains a priority. These channels must be based on the needs and preferences of various programme stakeholders, particularly vulnerable groups. As part of this broader approach to complaints and feedback management, UNICEF continued its efforts to ensure that specific reporting mechanisms for sexual exploitation and abuse are safe, accessible and victim/survivor-centred.

22. In 2024, the number of UNICEF programme countries scaling up reporting channels for sexual exploitation and abuse increased to 125 out of 158 (79 per cent), up from 110 (70 per cent) in 2022 and just 8 (5 per cent) in 2017. Fifty-six countries reported expanded community access to reporting channels. This progress was driven by extending reporting channels beyond child protection to all UNICEF programme sectors, thereby enhancing accessibility for women and girls across programme locations. As a result, an estimated 79.4 million children and adults had access to safe and accessible sexual exploitation and abuse reporting channels in 2024, a 61 per cent increase from 49.2 million in 2022 when this indicator was first introduced in the Strategic Plan's results monitoring framework. Effective community-based reporting channels require an internal system with trained personnel to handle allegations, as well as visible information on reporting procedures and available assistance in local languages at all UNICEF-supported sites. In 2024, 127 out of 129 country offices (98 per cent) reported having office-wide sexual exploitation and abuse reporting systems, personnel training, internal management structures for receiving and reporting allegations, and a focal point system.

23. Additionally, 116 country offices (90 per cent) trained all implementing partners, including government partners, while 57 (44 per cent) displayed age- and gender-sensitive key messages and communications materials at all UNICEF-supported sites. Strengthening reporting systems within country offices and among partners by adopting a harmonized and risk-based approach to complaints and feedback management is essential for scaling up safe and accessible community-based reporting channels.

24. Community engagement is crucial for building trust in reporting systems. In 2024, UNICEF conducted a study in South Sudan and Burkina Faso to understand community preferences, particularly those of women and girls, regarding safe reporting channels. Using this evidence, UNICEF and implementing partners co-designed a community-based reporting model that enhanced access, including through trusted community intermediaries, trained nutrition and gender-based violence workers and local women-led organizations. This collaboration was vital for building trust so that survivors can come forward to safely report sexual exploitation and abuse.

25. In the Sudan, UNICEF played a key role in strengthening and expanding reporting mechanisms and channels, reaching over 2 million people – a 33-fold increase on 2023. In Lebanon, the country office utilized the UNICEF U-Report platform to refer its users to confidential, trustworthy and free services by sending tailored safe messages that were accessible to all users. These efforts led to a twofold increase in the reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse allegations. In Venezuela, UNICEF introduced inclusive feedback channels for children and adolescents with disabilities in partnership with a local disability-led organization. UNICEF proactively worked to increase community awareness in several countries, such as Colombia, the Sudan and Lebanon, using different means to ensure they were adapted to the needs of the local communities. Examples include using drama, mobile cinema, radio talk shows and television programmes, engaging local government to amplify outreach, using child-friendly awareness methods, distributing flyers in non-food items and in shelters during emergencies, and collaborating through female outreach volunteers' networks.

B. Investigations are survivor-centred and timely, and result in appropriate accountability measures

26. The benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Investigations are victim/survivor-centred, including by keeping the victims/survivors informed and supported;

(b) Investigations are carried out in a timely manner and appropriate accountability measures are taken.

27. UNICEF immediately escalates and manages allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving its personnel and implementing partners. In 2024, OIAI received and registered 861 new cases, including 329 concerning alleged misconduct by UNICEF staff members. Of the new cases, sexual exploitation and abuse was the second-largest category (19 per cent), following fraud involving misuse of programme funds by third parties. It should be noted that OIAI occasionally receives reports pertaining to subjects or perpetrators who are either not identifiable or are not linked to UNICEF at all. These cases are not added to the United Nations-wide data system for tracking sexual exploitation and abuse allegations, but are registered in the internal UNICEF case management system.

28. From 1 January to 31 December 2024, UNICEF reported 111 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, involving 131 victims/survivors and 117 perpetrators – 18 involving UNICEF personnel and 93 involving personnel of implementing partners, compared with 5 involving UNICEF personnel and 48 involving implementing partners in 2023.

29. Of the 93 cases involving implementing partners, 45 have been closed. In 16 cases, the alleged perpetrators were found to have committed sexual exploitation and abuse and dismissed from the implementing partner entity as a result. In two cases,

the alleged perpetrators were found to have committed sexual exploitation and abuse but not dismissed from the hiring entity, based on case-specific circumstances. In four cases, the alleged perpetrator separated from the hiring entity before the allegation was found to be substantiated and, in one case, the allegation was reclassified and determined not to constitute sexual exploitation and abuse. In nine cases, the allegations were unsubstantiated. In two cases, the subject resigned or separated while the investigation or the disciplinary process was still pending. In four cases, there was a lack of collaboration or corroboration from the victim/survivor or complainant. In four cases, there was lack of jurisdiction over the allegation and in three cases, there was insufficient information to assess the allegation.

30. Additional information on UNICEF allegations reported since 2017 can be found on the website of the United Nations Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.

31. Of the 17 cases of allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving UNICEF personnel publicly reported in the iReport Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Tracker in 2024, 14 have been closed as at the time of the writing of this report. Of these 14 cases, 8 were closed after assessment, and 6 were investigated. Three of the six investigations were closed as unsubstantiated or because UNICEF lacked jurisdiction over the alleged perpetrator. In two investigations, reports were submitted to the office responsible for the disciplinary process and are pending adjudication. In the remaining investigation, the sexual exploitation and abuse allegations were not substantiated but other allegations were substantiated, and the matter was submitted to the office responsible for the disciplinary process and is pending adjudication.

32. Under key performance indicators introduced in 2023, OIAI aims to finalize 65 per cent of its cases under assessment within 90 days and 65 per cent of its cases under investigation within nine months. In 2024, the Office closed 32 per cent of assessments of sexual exploitation and abuse (including assessments of implementing partner investigations) within 90 days, and 40 per cent of investigations of sexual exploitation and abuse within nine months. All cases of sexual misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse, receive the highest level of prioritization. The often complex and challenging nature of these cases, including the need to ensure that potential victims/survivors receive appropriate support and provide informed consent to proceed with any investigative process, as well as difficulties identifying potential victims/survivors and subjects in some instances, can prolong timelines in some cases.

33. The number of country offices where all civil society organization partners met full capacity standards rose from 13 in 2023 to 44 in 2024. However, capacity gaps persist, particularly in the provision of assistance and investigations. To operationalize a victim/survivor-centred approach in investigations and to address the investigation capacity gaps of implementing partners, multiple initiatives were started in the previous years and maintained throughout 2024. Examples of such initiatives include the training of over 200 implementing partner staff in Eastern and Southern Africa in child-sensitive and victim/survivor-centred investigation practices. In Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Lebanon, UNICEF supported in-country networks for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse to train implementing partners and establish pools of qualified investigators to ensure sustainable capacity. Other initiatives undertaken by some organizations include enrolling their staff in the course on sexual exploitation and abuse investigations offered by the Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, as well as mappings of lawyers to support in investigating cases. In the Central African Republic, trained child protection experts supported investigations to safeguard the safety and well-being of child survivors. Good practices included creating child-friendly

environments that used play materials and maintaining clear communication with survivors and their guardians throughout the investigation process.

34. In 2024, OIAI delivered four presentations on responding to reports of sexual exploitation and abuse involving implementing partners across four regions: West and Central Africa, Europe and Central Asia; Middle East and North Africa; and Latin America and the Caribbean. These presentations were attended by relevant UNICEF focal points and aimed at strengthening the response to sexual exploitation and abuse allegations involving implementing partners.

C. Adequate safeguards and appropriate actions ensure the effective tackling of sexual exploitation and abuse when working with implementing partners

35. The benchmark for measuring progress under this element is:

(a) Implementing partners have adequate protection from sexual exploitation and abuse safeguards in place, and action is taken in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse.

36. In line with its 2024 Policy on Safeguarding, UNICEF initiated the expansion of its approach to strengthen implementing partners' capacities beyond protection from sexual exploitation and abuse to include other types of safeguarding harm, including the development of capacity-strengthening and training materials and resources. This work will continue as a priority in 2025.

37. The engagement with implementing partners on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacities remains instrumental in ensuring that they have adequate systems to prevent and manage sexual exploitation and abuse risks. In 2024, 2,376 (84 per cent) of 2,810 active civil society organizations that partner with UNICEF were rated as having "full" capacity (meeting all eight core standards of the assessment), 10.35 per cent, or 292, were rated at "medium" capacity (meeting six to seven core standards of the assessment), while only 2.9 per cent (81 organizations) were rated at "low" capacity (meeting five or fewer core standards of the assessment) with capacity gaps that are expected to be addressed within six months of the low capacity assessment. As part of its Strategic Plan Indicator 3.5 ("Percentage of country offices that have a system in place to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse"), UNICEF benchmarks the proportion of country offices' implementing partners that have adequate capacity on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. Of the 123 UNICEF country offices with civil society partners, 116 offices met the benchmark of 80 per cent of their partners having full or medium capacity. All implementing partners (100 per cent) in 42 country offices were rated as having full capacity, compared with only 13 country offices in 2023. In 2024, UNICEF finalized the transition from its agency-specific assessment tool to fully align with the IASC Harmonized Implementation Tool on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse capacity. The updated assessments of all active civil society implementing partners are available in the dedicated module of the United Nations Partner Portal, hereby facilitating in one digital platform a coordinated United Nations approach on engagement with implementing partners on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. Since the launch of the dedicated module in the United Nations Partner Portal in May 2023, UNICEF has, as one of the leading agencies of the Implementing Partner Protocol Working Group, strived to regularly collect field-based lessons to make the module more user-friendly.

38. Efforts to support implementing partners to strengthen their policies and practices on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse continued to be a key

priority for UNICEF, with the completion of a dedicated resource library in the United Nations Partner Portal and the launch of the updated version of the practical guide and toolkit on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. The toolkit, available in Arabic, English, French, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish, serves as key guidance to organizations to develop and strengthen their protection from sexual exploitation and abuse procedures and mechanisms. Providing tailored support for implementing partners' capacity-strengthening in the areas where gaps remain, in particular reporting, assistance and investigative capacities, continues to be a key priority for UNICEF.

39. Additionally, UNICEF strove to go beyond the minimum requirements of the 2018 United Nations Protocol on Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse involving Implementing Partners by further advancing the integration of sexual exploitation and abuse risk management throughout all stages of partnerships and programming cycles. Dedicated activities and indicators are integrated in partnership cooperation agreement documents and processes for monitoring and programme reviews, helping make protection from sexual exploitation and abuse part of regular conversations and follow-up with implementing partners.

40. UNICEF also continued its work to strengthen safeguarding risk management with vendors engaged in high-risk activities, such as vendors that require direct contact with communities, by developing a resource package on Safeguarding in Supply Resource, inclusive of sexual exploitation and abuse, for use by the UNICEF Supply Community. This package aims to provide a practical resource for the integration of safeguarding risk-mitigation measures throughout the contracting cycle. This includes: a) a clear definition of safeguarding risk factors to support risk assessments, as well as recommended risk-mitigation measures; b) safeguarding standards for inclusion in bidding processes; and c) safeguarding-focused vendor engagement materials. This package will also include a set of safeguarding-specific provisions for high-risk contracts. These provisions are currently being drafted and will complement existing general terms and conditions and the United Nations Supplier Code of Conduct. Expected to be rolled out in 2025, this package will strengthen internal and external capacities on managing safeguarding risks in supply. UNICEF has also been engaged in the inter-agency Commercial Partners Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Working Group, which is working on recommending minimum safeguarding standards, inclusive of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, for vendors and other commercial partners working with the United Nations.

D. Efforts to address sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment across UNICEF are continuously strengthened, including through reinforced capacity and evidence-based and risk-informed approaches

41. The benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

- (a) Regular sexual exploitation and abuse risk assessments inform prevention and response strategies;
- (b) Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse/sexual harassment focal points and/or dedicated protection from sexual exploitation and abuse specialists are appointed at headquarters, regional and country levels;
- (c) All staff and affiliated personnel complete mandatory training and/or briefing on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse;

(d) Reference checking and vetting for prior misconduct is systematically carried out as part of recruitment processes.

42. To support evidence-based decision-making and identify high-risk contexts, UNICEF, in collaboration with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, revised and led the adaptation of the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Risk Overview (SEARO) Global Index which was released in November 2024. The SEARO, a first-of-its-kind tool for analysing sexual exploitation and abuse risks, ranks countries with ongoing humanitarian response operations according to their level of risk, enabling comparisons of risk between countries, and supports the IASC, donors and the humanitarian community to make a more informed use of limited humanitarian resources in countries with the highest risk and priority issues. The tool has helped the IASC prioritize the deployment of skilled inter-agency coordinators for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse to high-risk countries. UNICEF, together with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, also led on adapting the SEARO methodology to the subnational level for more-detailed risk analysis using local data, with pilots conducted in Colombia and Afghanistan in 2024. This informed the development of a methodology note to guide future subnational adaptations in other countries.

43. In 2024, UNICEF maintained its 34 specialists on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse embedded across high-risk countries and all regional offices. These specialists play a key role in ensuring that protection from sexual exploitation and abuse is prioritized from the outset of humanitarian responses. These dedicated posts significantly contributed to accelerating the roll-out of robust and agile systems for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and surpassing the Strategic Plan 2024 indicator target for “Percentage of country offices that have a system in place to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse”. Most UNICEF country offices also established and trained focal points at national and sub-office levels.

44. UNICEF has a mandatory online protection from sexual exploitation and abuse training course for staff and affiliated personnel. In 2024, 96 per cent of staff and 86 per cent of all personnel (including non staff) had completed training on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

45. The UNICEF global “community of practice” on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in programming, established in March 2022, has continued to meet monthly and facilitate webinars on a wide range of topics related to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, including prevention and risk mitigation. The community of practice brings together over 500 staff from across all regions, country offices, programming areas, units and divisions, and facilitates the sharing of good practices and collaborative problem-solving, and addresses challenges across all areas of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse programming.

46. The Evaluation Office, in partnership with the Division of People and Culture (formerly Division of Human Resources) and the Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, conducted a baseline assessment of UNICEF human resources safeguarding practices throughout 2024, with completion scheduled for the first quarter of 2025. The preliminary findings of the assessment identified existing strengths, gaps, challenges and opportunities to embed safeguarding in human resources, across different operational contexts and organizational levels, including reference checking and vetting. The depth of reference checks varies by office, with some performing more-comprehensive checks than others. Resource and situational constraints can affect the degree to which safeguarding efforts are applied in background checks and time pressures can hinder comprehensive background checks, especially during emergencies when rapid recruitment is prioritized. UNICEF uses Clear Check, a system-wide screening tool to avoid the hiring and re-hiring of

individuals whose working relationship with an organization within the system ended because of a determination that they had perpetrated sexual harassment or sexual exploitation and abuse. It also allows for the inclusion in Clear Check of individuals with pending allegations who left the organization before the completion of the investigation and/or disciplinary process. Prior to 1 March 2025, Clear Check recorded only cases related to sexual exploitation and abuse and did not include broader misconduct; from 1 March 2025, an expanded version of Clear Check, covering separations for all forms of misconduct, has been rolled out by the United Nations Secretariat, the business owner of the system. The preliminary recommendations of the report focus on the following areas: (a) strengthening the safeguarding and human resources regulatory framework and related tools to streamline safeguarding practices in human resources; (b) reinforcing safeguarding as an organizational priority by, among other actions, revisiting the accountability framework and further strengthening safeguarding in the supply cycle, including by undertaking a dedicated baseline assessment; (c) investing in safeguarding staff and focal points and capacity development of personnel, aligning with the existing structures in place such as protection from sexual exploitation and abuse; (d) institutionalizing the emerging good practices already being implemented in human resources and ensuring they are consistently applied across headquarters, regional offices and country offices; and (e) strengthening safeguarding procedures in emergency contexts. The baseline assessment of human resources safeguarding practices includes a benchmarking exercise among other United Nations entities to analyse the extent of use of the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme as an additional channel for background checks. Based on the findings, UNICEF is assessing the feasibility of implementing the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, including the costs that would be incurred. In addition, through the United Nations Executive Group to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Harassment, UNICEF is continuously informed on good practices related to screening mechanisms on sexual misconduct, including on the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme.

47. Insights from the baseline assessment are informing priority actions, including the process changes, guidance, tools and support that accompany the roll-out of the Policy on Safeguarding.

E. Quality, victim/survivor-centred support is operationalized

48. The benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Assistance for victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is provided in accordance with established protocols and standards [including the United Nations protocol on the provision of assistance to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse (Victims Assistance Protocol), victim/survivor-centred approach, and gender-based violence and child protection referral pathways];

(b) The implementation of the United Nations Victims Assistance Protocol is strengthened at the country level.

49. UNICEF continued leading the roll-out of the United Nations Victim Assistance Protocol, ensuring consistent application of its standards across all IASC actors, including United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders. In 2024, UNICEF trained United Nations country teams, humanitarian country teams and country inter-agency networks on the Protocol in Cameroon, Chad, Pakistan, Syria and Ukraine bringing the total number of countries provided with tailored training and technical support to 20. To date, globally over 2,000 professionals have received training or orientation on the Protocol from UNICEF. To foster a unified IASC-wide approach and accelerate the roll-out of the Protocol,

UNICEF is updating the technical note on victim assistance, ensuring that non-governmental organizations have a coordinated approach to provide quality victim/survivor-centred assistance and that the Protocol's standards are universally applied.

50. UNICEF led or supported the establishment and/or revision of inter-agency procedures for victim/survivor assistance in 16 countries (Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, the State of Palestine, Syria, Tajikistan and Togo) to contribute to more-coordinated and survivor-centred assistance and support. By the end of 2024, 83 out of 129 countries (64 per cent) had inter-agency procedures meeting Protocol standards, up from 64 countries (50 per cent) in 2023 and the highest since 2017. Additionally, 26 countries (20 per cent) had fully rolled out these procedures, up from 18 (14 per cent) in 2023, to ensure survivors receive timely support. Despite this progress, UNICEF recognizes the need for increased investment in victim/survivor assistance and gender-based violence services, which are underfunded, to ensure all survivors can access the quality assistance and services to which they are entitled.

51. As per the Victim Assistance Protocol, services for survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse include safety and security, including protection from retaliation; immediate medical referrals and ongoing medical care, as needed; mental health and psychosocial support; legal aid and legal services; basic material assistance and socioeconomic empowerment, including livelihoods and income-generation support. Additionally, children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse are entitled to the same services as any other victim, as well as services for potential additional needs related to paternity claims and child support.

52. However, gaps remain in different contexts. Not all services are consistently available through gender-based violence referral pathways, and specialized services may be inadequate or insufficient. There are significant gaps in legal assistance, particularly for survivors seeking justice, child support or to establish paternity. Socioeconomic empowerment (e.g. income-generation activities, skills development, and education support for children) and livelihood support are largely unavailable or insufficient in most contexts. Additionally, specialized medical care, including clinical management of rape, is not readily accessible to survivors in all contexts. This highlights the need for enhanced efforts and funding to scale up gender-based violence services to ensure that comprehensive services are consistently available to all survivors, in line with the Victim Assistance Protocol.

53. Despite progress in many countries, assistance remains inconsistent and unpredictable, often falling short of IASC survivor-centred standards. In 2024, only 26 per cent of funding requirements in the gender-based violence sector to address the needs of survivors were met, resulting in critical service gaps that undermine accountability and survivors' trust. Survivors also face barriers to justice, including delays in paternity tests and limited legal recourse.

54. To address these challenges, UNICEF continues to provide technical support and capacity-building, thereby strengthening systems for coordinated, system-wide victim/survivor assistance. UNICEF is driving the implementation of streamlined referral mechanisms to connect survivors to appropriate services. UNICEF is also advocating for consistent, adequate funding mechanisms to support survivor-centred assistance, emphasizing the need for coordinated funding models to avoid gaps and fragmentation in how assistance is being resourced. Additionally, UNICEF is strengthening partnerships with local actors to support more sustainable and comprehensive assistance systems that restore victims/survivors' trust and uphold accountability.

F. Inter-agency coordination and collaboration on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse are strengthened

55. The benchmarks for measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Entity actively contributes to the improvement of inter-agency coordination and collaboration on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse at the country level, including through the development and implementation of United Nations country team protection from sexual exploitation and abuse action plans and participation of the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse focal points in the inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordination structures;

(b) Entity actively participates in and contributes to the work of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment coordination structures at the global level (including the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Working Group, IASC protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment Technical Advisory Group, and the Executive Group on the Prevention and Response to Sexual Harassment).

56. UNICEF is one of the leading agencies of the Implementing Partner Protocol Working Group, which is the main global platform for strengthening a coordinated and harmonized approach to manage risks of sexual exploitation and abuse when working with implementing partners. Several in-country networks for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse were supported by the working group throughout 2024 to strengthen inter-agency coordination, including Burkina Faso, Colombia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Türkiye and Uganda. A persistent challenge to inter-agency coordination, at all levels, remains the various stages of the operationalization of the 2018 Protocol, with rates of partner assessments differing between individual United Nations agencies. Additionally, UNICEF is actively contributing to the development of a harmonized approach in relation to minimum safeguarding standards for vendors and other commercial partners working with the United Nations, through its engagement with and support to the inter-agency Commercial Partners Working Group.

57. UNICEF maintains, manages and regularly updates the IASC protection from sexual exploitation and abuse website and global dashboard. These platforms enable progress tracking and make critical information and resources widely accessible to practitioners, donors and implementing partners. In 2024, the dashboard was updated to reflect progress against the IASC protection from sexual exploitation and abuse core indicators and commitments, as outlined in its Acceleration Plan. These platforms and tools have become invaluable knowledge-sharing resources, supporting over 458,000 practitioners globally with the latest information on approaches and best practices. These platforms are important for accountability and effectiveness.

58. On an annual basis, and on behalf of the IASC, UNICEF tracks country-level action plans through the IASC global dashboard. This enables the system to track collective progress in accelerating protection from sexual exploitation and abuse across all countries with a humanitarian response plan or equivalent. For the 2023 data-collection period (2024 data collection will be conducted in the first quarter of 2025), all 32 humanitarian response plan countries (100 per cent) reported against the 18 core indicators; an improvement from 82 per cent in 2022. This informs decision-making by the humanitarian coordinators, and helps in strengthening the implementation of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse initiatives.

59. Additionally, in 2024, UNICEF funded dedicated inter-agency coordinator posts in five humanitarian response countries (Kenya, Pakistan, the State of Palestine, Syria and Yemen), and provided technical support to humanitarian coordinators and humanitarian country teams to strengthen accountabilities for protection from sexual

exploitation and abuse. In Syria, the long-term support of UNICEF as co-chair of the inter-agency network significantly improved inter-agency coordination, establishing system-wide standard operating procedures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and enhancing prevention, risk mitigation and response at the national and subnational levels.

60. UNICEF continues to chair the Executive Group on the Prevention and Response to Sexual Harassment and is leading the group's workstream on "Improving policies and strengthening systems", for which a workplan has been developed along with the other workstreams.

G. Culture change that addresses the root causes of sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment is advanced

61. The benchmarks measuring progress under this element are:

(a) Organizational culture and behaviour change to end sexual misconduct are actively promoted and form an organizational priority;

(b) Staff perception and engagement surveys inform the actions to improve the organizational culture.

62. UNICEF employee engagement surveys such as the Global Staff Survey and the Pulse Check on Workplace Culture are disaggregated by gender by default. They provide data for offices to design initiatives to eliminate a culture permissive to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

63. According to the 2024 Global Staff Survey, 92 per cent of respondents understand what constitutes misconduct (down from 96 per cent in 2022). Additionally, 63 per cent believe that heads of office are taking appropriate measures to prevent misconduct (down from 68 per cent in 2022) and 84 per cent of staff are aware of how and to whom they can report misconduct in UNICEF (down from 90 per cent in 2022). For sexual harassment, 84 per cent of respondents did not experience or witness behaviours that may constitute sexual harassment; 73 per cent believe measures to prevent and address sexual harassment in UNICEF are effective; and 74 per cent feel safe reporting sexual harassment. About 66 per cent of participants reacted positively to the statement of feeling safe to raise concerns, questions and issues with managers, a slight improvement from 60 per cent in the 2023 Pulse Check.

64. In 2024, UNICEF launched the Managing People With Purpose programme, a package that aims to strengthen the people management skills of the organization's 6,500+ supervisors globally. As part of the programme's learning component, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse themes are included both through e-learning modules (i.e. "How do I deal with questionable behaviours?" and "What do I do if there is an OIAI investigation in my team?"), and as part of the mandatory peer group coaching sessions.

65. The UNICEF Ethics Office along with the Global Staff Association piloted seven focus groups to engage UNICEF personnel proactively on preventing and addressing sexual harassment. A dedicated e-learning module on preventing and addressing sexual harassment is being developed by the Ethics Office in collaboration with the Division of People and Culture. The mandatory module for all staff is expected to be launched in the second quarter of 2025.

IV. Next steps

66. UNICEF will continue delivering on its strong commitment at all levels of the organization to prevent and reduce the risk of harm to all persons as a result of their contact with UNICEF.

67. Preventing and mitigating risks of safeguarding, including sexual exploitation and abuse, will require continued investment in staff awareness and their capacity to work with partners that are implementing programmes, vendors and other entities working with UNICEF. The development and enhancement of capacity-strengthening and training materials and resources for implementing partners and vendors will continue as a priority in 2025. Sustained efforts are needed to reinforce in-country and inter-agency collaboration and coordination on risk management with implementing partners. In relation to vendors, UNICEF expects the roll-out of its resource package on Safeguarding in Supply Resource to be instrumental in strengthening the safeguarding and environmental and social standards risk management of its vendors.

68. In 2025, UNICEF will update the AGORA mandatory training on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, taking into account a wider approach to safeguarding. In addition, the roll-out of the Policy on Safeguarding and related guidance will include training that targets all personnel.

69. In 2025, UNICEF will implement the agreed recommendations from the baseline assessment of UNICEF human resources safeguarding practices. Among the expected outputs will be changes to the regulatory framework, guidance, tools and other support that will accompany the roll-out of the Policy on Safeguarding.

70. Collaboration with other organizations and leadership in several inter-agency initiatives will continue globally and at the country level. UNICEF will continue to collaborate on initiatives and share evidence with the Office of the Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and the IASC globally, in-country networks, and donors, partners and suppliers.

V. Draft decision

The Executive Board

Welcomes the update provided by UNICEF on progress made on preventing and protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse within the broader risk management and safeguarding framework.
