



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

# **UNICEF-NGOS PARTNERSHIP IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS:**

**STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES  
AND WAYS FORWARD**

# I. BACKGROUND

In the context of UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2018-2021 and increased efforts to deliver humanitarian results for children, the Office of Emergency Programmes (EMOPS) recognises that stronger alliances with NGOs play a critical role in the delivery and improvement of UNICEF responses.

Although UNICEF and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operate in a complex environment involving many actors, NGOs remain critical to the delivery of results for children, both through joint programmes and advocacy. A variety of coordination mechanisms have been established by UNICEF to help the development of partnerships with NGOs, both international (INGOs) and national/local ones, as well as other civil society actors. However, there is always space

for improvement and further engagement to enhance the effectiveness of these relations.

Against this background, beginning in 2019, UNICEF and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) agreed to jointly reach out to the NGO sector to receive their feedback and perceptions of the current partnership with UNICEF and explore pathways to improve the partnership, including through setting up a formal mechanism of regular consultations. The overall purpose behind the initiative is to ensure a dedicated safe space for dialogue and exchange for improved partnership between UNICEF and NGOs to advance results for children in humanitarian settings.

# II. METHODOLOGY

The concept of the free space to discuss partnership was at the core of the methodology developed. An external consultant, with knowledge of UNICEF and the NGO sector, was hired to conduct the scoping study, facilitate feedback by the NGOs, analyse them and produce the following report and recommendations.

ICVA provided an excellent platform for such exchanges, not only due to its large membership, which includes both international and national NGOs, but also due to its convening mandate and similar experiences in facilitating other NGOs consultation processes, namely with UNHCR and IOM for the humanitarian interventions. UNICEF provided the needed backup support both through EMOPS colleagues and the Regional Emergency Advisers, who were informed and given the possibility to contribute throughout the process.

Overall, over 350 staff from various NGOs contributed to this study. The majority of them (266) contributed by filling out a survey. In addition to the survey, five regional exchanges took place with NGOs operating respectively in Asia, Europe & North America, Latin America, Africa and MENA. Moreover, few

selected INGOs had a more in-depth discussion on partnership with UNICEF. A similar exchange took place also with a number of national NGOs and national NGO fora that came to Geneva, during the week of the ICVA Annual Conference. At the same time, since these exchanges took place in the framework of a scoping study that might be followed up by more formal consultations, efforts were made to avoid a time consuming and heavy process for the NGOs participating.

From the beginning, the idea behind was to get a broad understanding of how partnership is perceived by the NGOs, and not measure its impact in terms of results for children, their families and communities. Therefore, considering also the limitations in time and resources, no investment was made to consider results at country level, nor to exchange with State representatives as well as with children and communities. This said, the scoping study aims to be comprehensive in describing how NGOs experience the partnership with UNICEF and proposes concrete options for how to proceed looking forward.

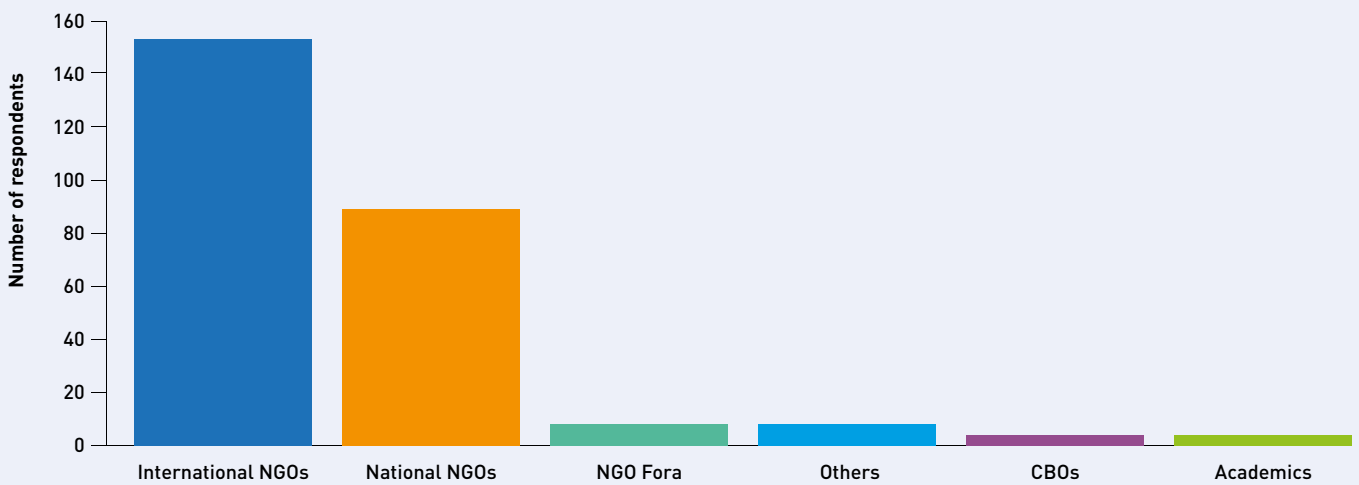
### III. PARTICIPATION

#### The survey:

The large participation of staff from NGOs throughout the process shows the interest among NGOs to partner with UNICEF in all the regions. The survey, which was initially shared with a list of 350 representatives of NGO partners was further disseminated by many of them. Within three weeks the number of respondents reached 266; out of whom 32 filled it in French, 6 in Spanish and 228 in English.

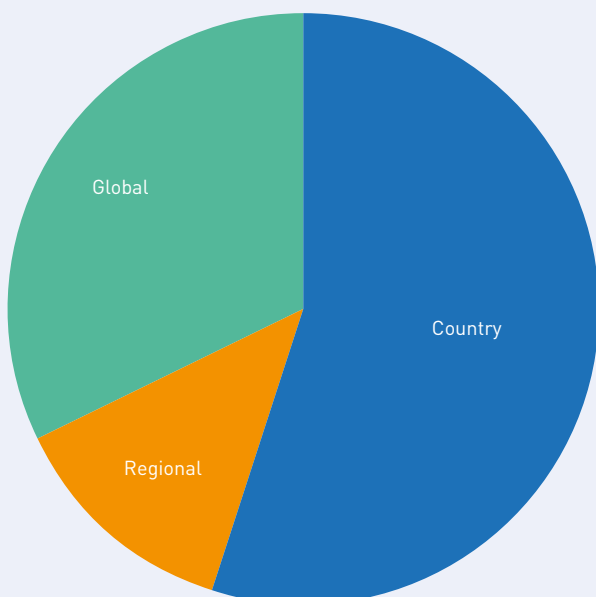
The respondents are mainly NGO staff; they work at country, regional and global level; and cover all relevant geographic areas. The majority of the respondents work for an INGO (153 respondents out of 266), followed by 89 respondents working for national NGOs, while few respondents identified themselves as working for NGO fora (8), community based organisations (CBOs) (4), academics (4) and others (8). A breakdown of the 266 respondents based on the type of civil society organisation (CSO) they represent is shown below in Diagram 3A.

**DIAGRAM 3A: CSOs REPRESENTED BY THE RESPONDENTS OF THE SURVEY**



It is also worthy to note that most of the respondents hold position at country level as shown below in Diagram 3B.

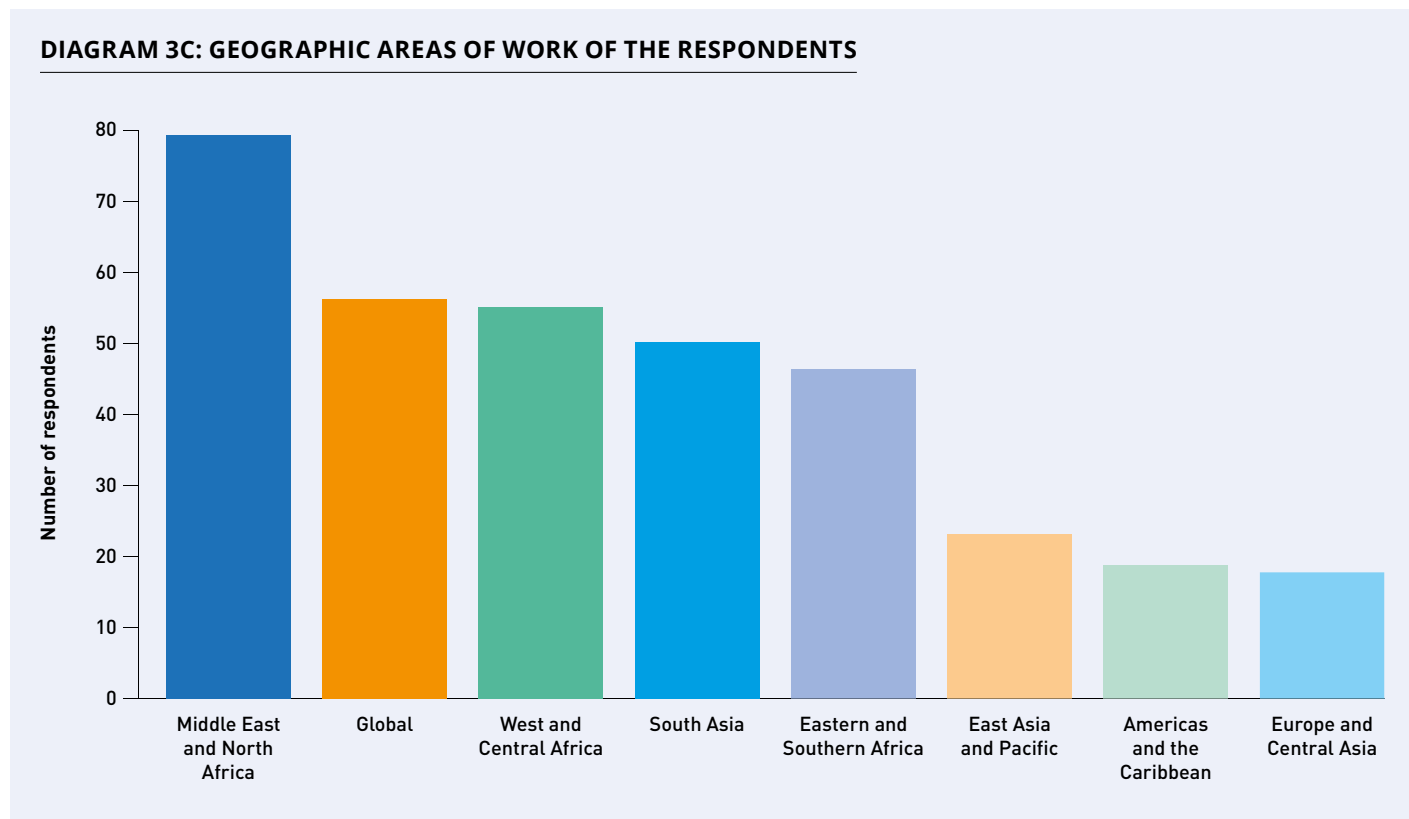
**DIAGRAM 3B: POSITIONS OF THE RESPONDENTS WITHIN THEIR RESPECTIVE ORGANISATION**



Some 79 respondents work in Middle East and North Africa, while 55 work in West and Central Africa and 50 work in South Asia. Below, diagram 3C illustrates the geographic focus of the work of the respondents.

Out of the 266 of respondents, 200 of them declared that their organisation is or had been in a partnership with UNICEF in the last five years, and over half of them (126 respondents) declared that such partnership was mainly ruled through a Programme Cooperation Agreement (PCA).

**DIAGRAM 3C: GEOGRAPHIC AREAS OF WORK OF THE RESPONDENTS**



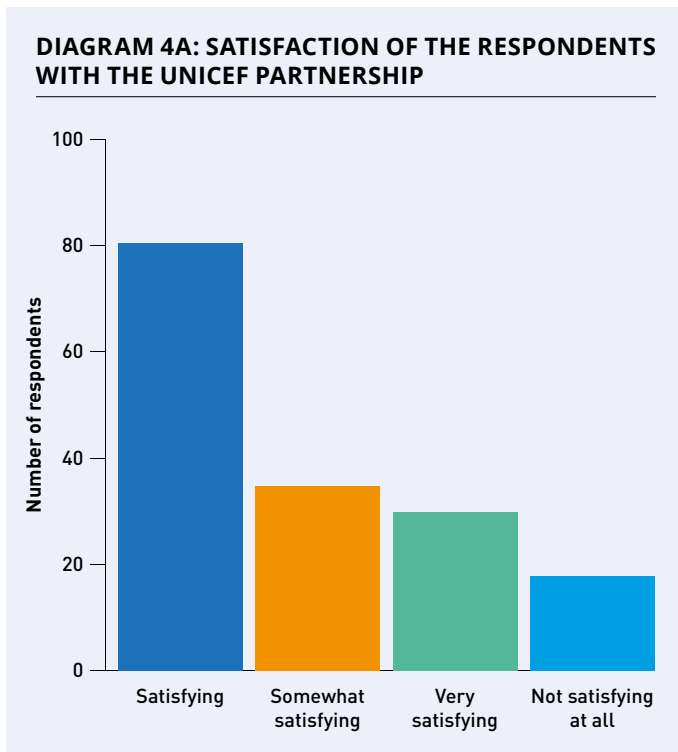
**The exchanges:**

With regard to the regional exchanges and the other two meetings, the number of participants varied every time between 10 and 25 NGOs. All participants to these exchanges represented NGOs that were or had been in partnership with UNICEF in the last five years. The majority of them represented national NGOs, but some of the INGOs attended more than one regional meeting and contributed also to the

specific exchange with INGOs. A full list of all NGOs which participated to the meetings is included in the annexes to this report. Considering the large participation to the survey, the various regional outreach, activities and methods used for this study, it can be concluded that the findings below are quite representative of the NGOs' current perception of the partnership with UNICEF.

## IV. FINDINGS

Participants had the option of not answering any of the questions of the survey. Most of the questions were answered by over 200 participants. However, for some questions the answer rate was lower. For example, only 164 out of the 266 respondents, answered the question on how they assessed the partnership with UNICEF. Diagram 4A below reflects their answers.



Both the survey and the exchanges were helpful in better understanding what NGOs consider to be the main strengths and weaknesses of the partnership which are summarised below. Many responses from the survey and a few responses from the exchanges focuss on one particular country experience. However, the summary below focusses only on reoccurring strengths/weaknesses across countries. Opportunities and threats will also be briefly discussed.

### a) Strengths of partnership

Many of the NGOs have long partnerships with UNICEF in humanitarian settings and had a lot to share about the way they have built and experienced the partnership. Both the answers to the survey and the discussions during the events provided a good insight on what is appreciated by the NGOs. Although it is difficult to summarise this rich experience, below is an attempt to group the feedback received.

#### Shared commitments:

- UNICEF is a crucial partner which is increasingly investing in humanitarian context;
- We share the same concerns for children, we are aligned in terms of priorities;
- UNICEF supports interventions that other donors do not, which is crucial for NGO partners;

#### Joint analysis, planning and implementing the response, and advocacy:

- UNICEF is present in the field, which means UNICEF understands the situation and our challenges and UNICEF staff is more directly involved in implementation than other partners;
- UNICEF is strong in analysing the context, including the political environment, and this helps NGOs in structuring interventions;
- UNICEF's voice in advocacy makes a difference; UNICEF is listened to by the authorities;
- UNICEF is efficient in influencing public policy;
- Joint campaigns have been successful (i.e. on addressing violence against children, education).

#### Strong technical expertise:

- We can learn from each other in terms of programmatic strategies, data collection and measurement of results;
- UNICEF provides technical assistance which has enabled us to work better. Positive experiences were mentioned in terms of UNICEF support in institutional capacity, including grant management, and upgrading intervention in child protection in line with international standards (training of partners);
- UNICEF has helped NGO partners to scale up intervention and better measure the results;
- UNICEF supports innovation and use of technology for children (example of working with partners and using technology to ensure children could access education).

#### Managing partnership:

- UNICEF works a lot with local and national NGOs;
- The joint portal has improved the partnership, the information is clearer, and the process is more transparent;
- There is ongoing and good quality communication on the partnership with UNICEF;
- UNICEF is open to discuss challenges in partnership and reacts upon concerns (example: protection against sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA));
- In some countries UNICEF's investments in consultation with NGOs are assessed as very satisfactory and useful;
- Participants from Africa mentioned improvements in the PCA.

## b) Weaknesses

The survey and the exchanges identified that UNICEF's approach to partnership is different from country to country, depending on the person in charge. Therefore, while in some countries some elements of partnership were identified as strengths, in others, the same elements were identified as challenges to the partnership, as shown also in the summary below.

Sometimes the dynamic of the partnership depends on the person in charge. The quality of the relations with that person is identified in itself as an area to improve to ensure a more standardised approach to partnerships across offices. Other challenges and weaknesses include:

### Heavy administrative process and unclear guidance:

- Heavy bureaucracy for the negotiation of the PCAs; the negotiations take too long, which may create delays in emergency contexts;
- The PCA guidelines are not clear and interpretation of the guidelines sometimes differs from one UNICEF Country Office (CO) to the other, and on occasions even within the same CO, depending on the staff;<sup>1</sup>
- Some respondents stated that deadlines are not always realistic and the reporting obligations are too frequent and heavy to comply with. A few participants mentioned for example that 'it takes UNICEF three months to review the report and then we should answer the questions in 24 hours';

### Little financial support and too many risks for the partners:

- UNICEF's financial support for partners is not always realistic taking into account the effective costs of doing business in some settings and the need to meet increasing requirements;
- Some partners feel the financial risk is transferred to them and there is limited flexibility among budget lines to accommodate changes;
- According to some respondents, UNICEF had not contributed to the safety and security costs of the partners<sup>2</sup>; and one or two situations were mentioned where UNICEF was not supportive when harm occurred to partners' staff;
- Few cases of lack of liquidity / funds by the UNICEF COs were mentioned, in which the NGOs had to cover costs totally on their own for a while;
- Financial reporting and closure of accounts on quarterly basis is burdensome and not productive;
- UNICEF has not progressed as committed in localisation of its financial policy;

### A top - down culture of partnership:

- The term 'implementing partners' does not reflect an equal partnership, and neither UNICEF's own strategic framework for partnership<sup>3</sup>;

- Some respondents mentioned that UNICEF can sometimes create unfair competition with NGOs at country level. For example, in one specific occasion, it was mentioned that UNICEF sought to receive 80% of funds available for one sector at the country level without clear and transparent allocation plans for the utilisation of these funds;
- UNICEF funds NGOs to implement UNICEF's programme/ activities which sometimes, according to the NGO partners, would require adjustments as they do not provide for the right solutions. Instead NGOs would prefer that UNICEF recognises them as equal partners by jointly designing the programme;
- UNICEF appears in need to lead all the time and takes all the visibility without leaving enough space for the visibility of partners;
- Not enough communication and consultations with partners. It is often UNICEF that decides. National NGOs are usually not around the table; even when INGO partners are invited to participate there is little feedback from UNICEF on how inputs are taken into account.

### UNICEF complex structure and its lack of predictability:

- In addition to a very decentralised modus operandi, the overall UNICEF structure is very fragmented, without a one-stop-shop NGO partners' entry point. Many of the NGOs are concerned as they do not understand the structure of UNICEF and where accountabilities are. This makes it difficult for them to get solutions for the identified problems;
- UNICEF does not speak with one voice on the same matter which confuses NGOs and doesn't make them keen to engage in a partnership with UNICEF;
- In some settings, UNICEF remains unpredictable. A few partners have mentioned that some programme managers don't develop exit strategy with the partners. On occasions, even though the need is still there and the ongoing work is delivering in terms of results, UNICEF stops funding;
- High turnover of UNICEF staff; each staff has its own approach and every-time the NGO has to explain the logic of intervention and agree on adjustments;
- UNICEF's role in the architecture of the humanitarian response and its collaboration with the other UN agencies is not always clear for some partners, sometimes placing NGOs in a difficult position between the various UN agencies.

### Lack of engagement in advocacy:

- UNICEF appears to have stepped back in advocacy; it shyies away from the public authorities and is not strongly supporting the advocacy of partners;
- UNICEF advocacy engagement on humanitarian issues with NGOs in Geneva remains timid. There is a very shy positioning in Geneva on the Global Compact on Refugees and IDPs issues as 2019 is the 30th anniversary of the CRC for the rights of children in humanitarian situations.

<sup>1</sup> In February 2019 UNICEF issued a new set of guidelines. As the various outreach activities for this scoping study took place in January – March 2019, the comments referred to NGOs' experiences with the previous guidelines

<sup>2</sup> Note: Security costs are eligible expenditures, when expressly requested in the programme document as per UNICEF CSO procedures

<sup>3</sup> ICEF/2009/10

## V. THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

It is difficult to structure the discussion on partnership in humanitarian settings in terms of threats and opportunities. For sure, the impact that humanitarian crisis has on children and the large number of children affected by them requires that more is done for the children, their families, and communities. Strengthened partnership in response between all actors, including UNICEF and NGOs, offers an opportunity to do better. Many of the NGOs consider that this scoping study provides an excellent opportunity to build upon and should as such not be missed. For NGOs, this is the beginning of a process, which, in their view, should remain result oriented.

This process should start without too many delays to avoid further challenges in the partnership. As an NGO staff elaborated, 'because of the heavy bureaucracy behind the PCA, we are considering limiting the partnership with UNICEF to joint advocacy only'.

Another threat to be avoided is to engage in meaningless consultations. Some of the NGOs referred to the past, where UNICEF has started consultations with NGOs about partnership in humanitarian settings without ensuring any proper follow up. NGOs are also concerned about the structure of UNICEF and the risk that proposals for progress in partnership remain stuck internally within UNICEF and do not bring any changes in current practices.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this scoping study need careful reading. While NGOs consider the partnership with UNICEF in humanitarian settings as crucial and they appreciate many aspects of such partnership, there are also a number of challenges in the partnership they all echo. In addition, and as already mentioned, there are differences from experience to experience depending on the country in focus and the persons behind the partnership.

During the exchanges with NGOs, efforts were also made to discuss what NGOs see as being the reasons for existing challenges in the partnership. Some interesting elements came from this exchange. For example, the structure of UNICEF and the high rotation of staff were some of the reasons NGOs could give for what they experience as a lack of a harmonised and common approach to partnership with UNICEF.

UNICEF is indeed a large and complex agency. All the UNICEF staff interviewed for the study confirmed that when it comes to partnership, 'many divisions /structures play a role'. Playing a role is however different from being accountable and where the accountability lies within the various UNICEF structures is not clear to NGO partners.

NGOs also recognise that acting in humanitarian settings involves lots of restraints and there is always a high risk that not enough investments are done to build the trust and equality in the partnership. UNICEF's inability in the past to follow up on expectations raised, is still considered as a potential threat for the future of the partnership. The question raised is whether at UNICEF headquarters, the needed priority is given to the nature of the partnership and sufficient resources are invested to make the partnership work for children.

While NGOs might have some analysis of the current strengths and weaknesses of the partnership with UNICEF in humanitarian settings, there remain questions that need to be answered mainly by UNICEF through a careful internal analysis (i.e. 'why is UNICEF not outspoken in its advocacy?'; 'or 'why is UNICEF considered unpredictable by its partners?'; Another interesting issue to be discussed internally could be related to positioning and partnership with NGOs, while being also in competition for scarce funds).

NGOs also recognise that addressing some of the challenges in the partnership would require changes in the way they operate and build the partnership. They are open to hear from UNICEF on what they should be changing.

## VII. WAYS FORWARD

As agreed clearly by the NGOs, 'there is currently a momentum that should not be lost.' Having regular consultations with UNICEF on the partnership in humanitarian settings is a highly welcomed opportunity for them and would help gradually in addressing the existing challenges to the partnership.

There are differences of opinion on where such consultations should be held. The majority of the NGOs prioritise consultations at the country level. Indeed, most of the challenges in the partnership occur at the country level and need to be addressed at that level. From the perspective of the children, their families and communities, it also makes sense to have such investment at the country level where improved partnership translates directly into better services and results for them. However, many of the INGOs also pointed out to some partnership challenges beyond the country level, such as the interpretation of the PCA guidelines and joint global advocacy. Both positions and arguments are valid and it can thus be concluded that

investing in regular consultations both at global and country level would be the best way to move forward.

Though some NGOs staff indicated also the need for regional consultations, they remain in the minority. The role of the regions was mainly seen as promoting and supporting COs in building solid consultations and partnerships, harmonising approaches, monitoring and bridging between the country consultations with the global ones, etc. The model followed by IOM for its consultations with NGOs regarding partnership in humanitarian settings can also be followed with the global consultations rotating from one region to the other (see Annex No. 3).

In terms of periodicity, NGOs wanted the country consultations to be at least annually. The frequency of the consultations at the global level was considered to be less relevant and NGOs were even advising to have them on biennial basis as long as they are result oriented. The need to have meaningful consultations and a process to improve the partnership is what NGOs expect as a follow up to this study.

## VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Invest in advance to prepare the consultations well

- Avoid consultations for the sake of consultations; NGOs call for result oriented consultations;
- ToR were suggested to be drafted for the consultations with clear expected outcomes. Some NGOs are willing to invest in preparing in advance with UNICEF so that, for the points in the agenda, concrete suggestions can be discussed and agreed during the consultation;
- There was a strong call by NGOs for UNICEF to not include a subject in the consultation agenda, unless UNICEF itself is internally open to change its position on the subject.

### 2. Ensure participants can take decisions on behalf of the organisation

- As the consultations are to be result oriented, the number of participants has to be limited, but they should be in a position to make commitments on behalf of their respective organisation;
- Because of the decentralised structure of UNICEF, NGOs call for UNICEF Regional Directors and main emergencies' Country Representatives to also participate to the global consultations;
- In order to avoid having too many NGO representatives attending the global consultations, NGOs suggest that with few additional resources, they can get organised at the country and regional level and select their representatives for the global consultation. Based on the subjects in the

agenda, the NGOs can summarise the experience they have on the subjects in the region and come up with specific proposals that can then be discussed by their representatives at the global level;

- Child participation during the consultations is also suggested.

### 3. Focus on few issues in each consultation

- NGOs suggest limiting the subjects to one or two for consultations, as there is understanding that not all existing challenges can be addressed at once;
- At the global level, the proposal was to combine one issue of administrative/procedural character (i.e. PCA Guidelines) with one of a programme/advocacy nature. Some of the potential subjects, as suggested, are listed below:
  - Increasing States pledges in child protection and education in humanitarian settings;
  - Improving psychosocial interventions for children;
  - Protecting children in conflicts: are existing standards of international humanitarian law and human rights law clear enough/well implemented;
  - Addressing impunity for crimes against children;
  - Localisation;
  - Responding to the children's drive to become economically active, even in rather young ages;
  - Ensuring the implementation of the two Global Compacts contributes to the protection and fulfilment of the rights of the child.



#### **4. Ensure that progress is monitored and proactively communicated**

- It is suggested for the global consultation to set up a system of operationalising agreements and measuring progress with clear roles and responsibilities in this direction;
- UNICEF is encouraged to share the results of the global consultations with COs and providing them with clear guidelines in terms of how they should be operationalised in daily work;
- Achievement, progress and challenges should be regularly communicated to interested NGOs (via websites, mailing lists, webinars, etc.);
- UNICEF and NGOs should jointly invest more in evidencing how partnership serves better results for children, what works and what does not, by listening first of all to the children concerned.

#### **5. Go beyond the consultations and continue investing in enhancing equality in the partnership and ongoing dialog with NGOs**

- Many of the NGOs suggest an ongoing channel of communication on the partnership with UNICEF that is easily accessible and efficient in responding to issues raised;
- UNICEF might need to reflect further on how to avoid internal fragmentation, which hinders effective partnership. Having various divisions and structures involved is not an issue per se as long as there is a clear internal accountability along the line of roles, responsibilities and decision-making; and NGOs are clear on the entry point and follow-up;
- NGOs call for UNICEF to bring equality in partnership higher at the institutional level and strengthen existing mechanisms for ongoing dialog with humanitarian partners, going beyond the periodic consultations.



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