CASE STUDY

Documenting UNICEF's response to COVID-19: applied tools and practices

Nima Fallah, Ivan Butina and Sailas Nyareza

Abstract

Learning from experience has been recognized as an essential source of organizational growth, particularly for the multilateral organizations working on development issues across the globe. Within these organizations, collective learning happens when their members: (a) understand the strategic value of documenting lessons, (b) share the lessons widely within and beyond the organization, and (c) invest in incorporating and using the lessons in future situations. Keeping these three principles in mind, this case study explores key practices and challenges from UNICEF's effort in documenting its response to COVID-19 and seeks to contribute to the global dialogue on organizational learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, Lessons learned, Evidence generation, Knowledge Exchange, Knowledge Management, United Nations, UNICEF

Introduction

Experiential knowledge and evidence-informed decision making are at the core of international development and humanitarian work. The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) works in over 190 countries and territories and is responsible for providing humanitarian and developmental aid to children worldwide and advocate for their rights. To be a key player in the development sector, UNICEF is investing in putting knowledge to work to accelerate results for children. One of the main goals of UNICEF's new Knowledge Management Strategy (2021-2022) is to increase the learning from experience and uptake of knowledge and evidence in the organization's work. This includes investing in systematic documentation of what works and what does not in UNICEF programming worldwide.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, a growing number of UNICEF offices have started documenting UNICEF's response to COVID-19. UNICEF Country Offices, starting with the China Country Office, have been documenting emerging lessons from their response to the

pandemic to share them with other country offices and retain them as a reference for the future. The work that offices are doing already on their own initiative is mostly self-developed documentation of UNICEF's operational experience in responding to the crisis, namely implicit, emergent, primarily qualitative knowledge, rather than independently verified evidence through research or evaluation. The emerging lessons captured by offices will be shared across the organization and synthesized for global learning, providing valuable insights. These emerging lessons complement or feed into more rigorous data collection, research, and evaluative efforts that are planned and underway and help foster country-to-country learning.

The UNICEF Knowledge Management (KM) team is working closely with the UNICEF's Secretariat for COVID-19 on this effort to coordinate and facilitate the documentation of the organization's response to the pandemic and extract the early lessons. The work being done during the COVID-19 response is directly connected and will feed into the implementation of UNICEF's Knowledge Management Strategy Priority No.3, which is about systematically documenting good practices and challenges in UNICEF programmes, including health, nutrition, social policy, education and others. The KM strategy includes nine priority actions: (1) embedding KM in the country programming, (2) internal KM hub (3) documenting experiences and retaining knowledge, (4) basic office-level km elements, (5) KM capacity building for staff, (6) Human resources for KM, (7) KM and UNICEF ICT, (8) external knowledge platform, and (9) knowledge sharing among partners. Likewise, the efforts to encourage the use of the knowledge products resulting from this documentation work are directly connected and will feed into the implementation of the Strategy's priority No.1, which is about integrating KM with country programmes. Improved KM on COVID-19 will help UNICEF improve its overall KM, which will help the organization be better prepared for future crises.

In addition to a dedicated community of practice, which has been set up on the Yammer platform to enable cross-sectoral learning and knowledge exchange, the KM team is facilitating the documentation effort through five approaches. This article will discuss the approaches, the applied tools, and practices and review the challenges and lessons to learn that could be applied in a similar context.

Background and review of literature

Learning from our experience is the most basic of human activities, and it is easy to learn from experience if the experiences are powerful enough (Milton, 2010). The purpose of capturing lessons learned, and good practices is to disseminate, and reuse knowledge derived from experience, either to encourage the repetition of necessary outcomes or to prevent the reappearance of failures. By preventing recurrence of failures, organizations can make

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significant savings in their future investments against the traditional measures of time, cost, and quality (Greer, 2008; Janus, 2017; McClory, Read, and Labib, 2017), and therefore, investing and strengthening organization's knowledge retention and reuse capacities could significantly impact the efficiency in the long-term.

Reviewing the literature shows that various terms are used to define lessons learned, including debriefing, post-project reviews, post-project appraisals, project post-mortem, reuse planning, reflections, corporate feedback cycle, experience factory, knowledge across projects, cross-project learning, etc. (Disterer, 2002; Magoula and Benevento, 2013). Summarizing different definitions of lessons learned in the literature, Andrade et al. (2007) have highlighted the three essential requirements as (1) significance, meaning that they can be helpful in other cases as well, (2) validity, meaning that they can give reasonable and precise associations between problems and solutions, and (3) applicability, intending at bringing results to raise the total quality of knowledge transfer.

Duffield and Whitty (2015) highlighted two key factors of people and systems for lessons to be applied. Their literature review emphasized that lessons were often identified and captured, with much of the knowledge transferred successfully; however, the application element was the issue. They recommended six success factors to tackle the application challenge: learning, culture, social activities, technology, process, and infrastructure (Duffield and Whitty, 2015; McClory, Read, and Labib, 2017). Organizations learn, like individuals (Janus, 2017). However, learning in an organization is far more complex than it is for an individual (Milton, 2010). Kotnour (2000) states that organization's knowledge competencies will increase by capturing, adapting, disseminating, and applying knowledge within the organization. It is recognized in the literature that both individual and organizations tend to learn more from failures than from success (Labib and Read 2013; McClory, Read, and Labib, 2017) and that failures contain valuable evidence. However, organizations vary in their ability to learn from them (Desai, 2008; McClory, Read, and Labib, 2017). The organizational capacity to learn is vital for international public institutions (Janus, 2017).

UNICEF has a long history of working in emergencies and humanitarian contexts, both natural and human-made. On average, UNICEF responds to more than two hundred emergencies every year. From internal conflicts in Burundi (1993), Rwanda (1994), East Timor (1999), to the devastating earthquake of the Iranian city of Bam in 2003, and Tsunami in 2004, to the several global epidemics, HIV/AIDS (from the 1980s), Cholera outbreaks, Ebola (2014), and finally, COVID-19, UNICEF's expertise in the field together with its partnership with the governments and other stakeholders allowed to support strategic interventions quickly, where they are most needed. UNICEF also has extensive experience in documenting its expertise in the field (e.g., Shusterman, 2019; Fallah and Addai, 2017; Rossel-Cambier, Olsen and Pourzand, 2007). Each emergency response comes with its own lessons – hard lessons and challenges, as well as good practices. Much of the UNICEF's

lessons in the humanitarian responses led to a more timely, effective, and better-coordinated response in the other emergency occurrences.

UNICEF's lessons learned typically emerge from various sources: documentation of lessons and good practices after or during the course of events, evaluation reports, donor reports, annual reports, video capturing and stories from the field, knowledge sharing sessions, webinars, and other online formats, and many more. To date, UNICEF offices have captured more than 500 promising lessons and good practices on COVID-19 response (including evaluations, research and policy briefs, reports, and joint publications with other agencies). These lessons and promising practices come in the forms of blogs/articles, learning briefs, case studies, mapping, programme guidance, technical strategy notes, evaluations, research and policy briefs, publications with partners (UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank, 2020), reports, factsheets, videos, etc. China was the first country to face the COVID-19 pandemic and as a result, the UNICEF Country Office was one of the first offices which started documenting its experience. The education team had captured a case study on 'Supporting the school reopening for 230 million children' (UNICEF, 2020). The next section describes the implementation of the UNICEF's COVID-19 response documentation framework.

UNICEF's approach: documentation framework and stories from the field

The COVID-19 documentation group is coordinating around five streams of work (see Figure 1), known as the five-step approach. The principles behind these streams and their activities are described below.

Documentation approaches and methodological quality

Knowledge sharing and peer support

Easy access to emerging lessons and related knowledge products

Use of early lessons and related knowledge products

Identifying connections with other relevant initiatives within the Secretariat and beyond relating to COVID-19

Figure 1: Work streams of the COVID-19 documentation group (Source: Authors)

Documentation approaches and methodological quality

Having a common understanding and definition of 'what does lessons learned mean' is the building block of documentation. UNICEF defines lessons learned as 'detailed reflections on a particular project, initiative, or major work activity, and identification of learning points based on experiences and results achieved during implementation' (UNICEF, 2015, page 76). These lessons may be positive (successes) or negative (failures). In addition to the lessons learned, offices (e.g. West and Central Africa Regional Office, and Europe and Central Asia Regional Office) are capturing other types of practices, including emerging, promising, and good practices (for example, compendium of good practices: COVID-19 response by UNICEF West and Central Africa Regional Office, June 2021). The figure below shows how the quality of evidence and its impact evolve based on the types of the identified practice.
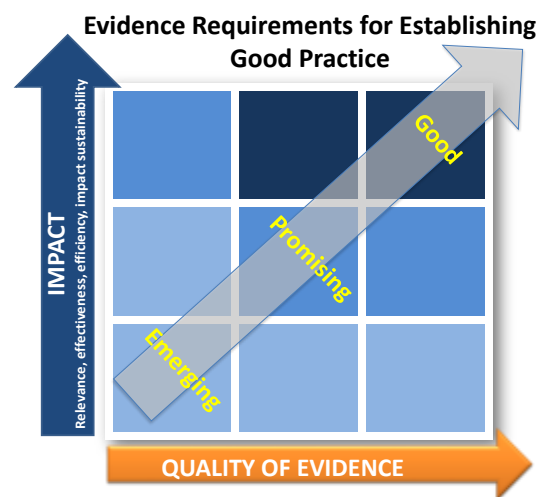

Figure 2: Quality of evidence and its impact evolve based on the types of the identified practice (Source: Bell and Miller, 2017)

The following steps have been taken by the team in terms of supporting the documentation work in its initial stages:

- Agree on common minimum definitions and standards for documenting emerging lessons including content standards and quality assurance processes.
- Pull together existing tools, guidance, and templates for the development of emerging lessons learned and practices.
- Encourage the adoption of the agreed-on definitions and methodological approaches.
- Provide feedback on the work being done by offices doing the documentation work.

Knowledge sharing and peer support

Given that several UNICEF's offices had already started doing documentation work and because of the organization's highly decentralized culture, the group decided that one way it would add value is to facilitate knowledge sharing and peer support among practitioners by:

- Encouraging the sharing of the work being done by offices and peer-to-peer feedback.
- Encouraging group members to share challenges and questions related to the work they are doing and ensure that they are addressed.
- Organizing peer assists or other online peer support sessions to address challenges faced by group members.
- Organizing sessions on knowledge sharing approaches if group members need support with their adoption.

This area of work was started even before the formal establishment of the group, by connecting a dozen practitioners already doing or starting to do documentation work. This connection happened through a Yammer community established in July 2020 following-up to a webinar in which colleagues from the China CO and the East Asia and Pacific Regional Office shared with UNICEF's KM community their approach to documenting their response to COVID-19 and making the resulting knowledge products accessible. Since July 2020, the membership of the Yammer community has passed 100 practitioners from field offices all the way to the HQ and covering all the regions in the world. The online community in Yammer has been used as a space for members to share updates on their work and ask questions. While members have been posting freely in the community space, a monthly Working Out Loud (WOL) thread has been used to collect updated. The community manager would occasionally open a new thread around an update or question shared in the WOL thread.

The updates and questions received in Yammer have informed the organization of live knowledge exchange and peer learning sessions. The group has used two different approaches in doing this: virtual peer assist around a question or challenge shared by a member; and knowledge café sessions to share approaches from different offices around a shared goal while also providing the space for small group discussion expanding the number of actively participating practitioners. The online sessions have been very successful in eliciting participation and contributions from practitioners who joined the group. The experience with knowledge sharing and peers support in Yammer has been mixed, with only a few popular threads. What the popular threads have in common is a proactive effort by the community manager to elicit contributions by personally reaching out to members.

Easy access to emerging lessons and related knowledge products

As UNICEF offices, both in HQ and the field generated a lot of lessons learned and related knowledge products such as case studies on the organization's response to COVID-19 there was need to design and implement a repository of these products to allow easy access and

feed into meta-analysis for organizational learning and feedback into programming. This work started with the general mapping of documented experiences that are scattered on various internal sites across the organization.

The team reviewed other lessons learned and good practices databases that have been developed within UNICEF and reached out to the teams to learn more about the design, technology modules used, maintenance and the processes for updating the emerging lessons. The repository will be part of the COVID-19 Secretariat intranet portal developed in SharePoint and will require some custom work. Users will be able to filter the knowledge products by the type of product, area of work, content language, country, date of publication or update and the office that generated the product. Also, users have the option to submit new lessons learned or case studies for inclusion in the repository or updating existing content.

Use of early lessons and related knowledge products
Like other offices at HQ level, UNICEF's Child Protection Section also set out to compile and synthetize lessons from the organization's response to the pandemic. They decided to do so through a series of learning briefs (see, for example, UNICEF Child Protection learning briefs, 2020), each one tackling a specific topic under child protection. However, additionally, to the compiling, synthetizing, and dissemination activities they asked a key question: 'How will we know that these briefs are being used?' This led to the creation of an area of work dedicated to creating a framework to assessing the use of knowledge products resulting from documentation work.

After a desk review on assessing the use of knowledge, the team is creating a framework to facilitate and assess use of knowledge, building mainly on The Knowledge Uptake and Utilization Tool (KUUT) by Skinner (2007) and the work previously done by one of the team members on developing an impact framework for communities of practice at the World Bank Group. The framework has three levels of assessment: engagement, reference, and practice. While engagement suggest several metrics that can be collected online to assess views, downloads, shares, and alike, the novelty to assess use of knowledge in UNICEF is in the reference and practice areas. In particular, the framework suggests the use of a software used for research purposes to identify references to the knowledge product in the organization's planning, policy, and advocacy, as well as other knowledge documents. The practice is assessed by surveying and interviewing practitioners from the target group to gage whether they are aware of the brief, have access it, applied its content in their work, or shared it with other practitioners. Given that several UNICEF offices have expressed interest in doing work on assessing use of knowledge, particularly knowledge products, in addition to sharing the child protection work with the COVID-19 documentation group, a dedicated group of KM practitioners has been formed to build on it and create a framework to be used by the whole organization. The same shared interest has been identified also among other organizations

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within the larger UN family, leading to the creation of an informal inter-agency group on assessing the use of knowledge.

Identify connections with relevant initiatives within the COVID-19 Secretariat

The curation of a list of all the documentation work being done by UNICEF offices and sharing of regular updates with the Secretariat and sectoral COVID-19 focal points at HQ level allowed offices to know what is happening in various parts of the organization. Colleagues have been able to reach out to offices experiencing similar challenges or offices that are also documenting lessons on a similar COVID-19 related topic. These connections also helped to ensure that relevant offices and technical sections are connected to provide inputs and feedback on the thematic content of the work being done. Key part of this work is to connect colleagues working on documenting early lessons to those working on other initiatives under the Secretariat's umbrella. The emerging lessons being documented were used as inputs in many other processes in the COVID-19 Secretariat, for example, the lessons were used to prepare a UNICEF executive board paper on COVID-19 response, Humanitarian Action for Children 2021 and feeding into updating of the COVID-19 Programme Approach and Prioritization internal guidance.

The COVID-19 Secretariat and other team have been able to identify opportunities for further analysis or synthesis of emerging experiences by theme or regionally, for use in programming and advocacy. The risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) team for example has put together a compendium including analysis of the lessons learned on the role RCCE plays in breaking the chains of transmission and mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Success factors, challenges, and organizational lessons learned

When it comes to capturing lessons learned, a good lesson should tell a story of change: it has a problem, actions taken to solve the issue, and a change that came about as a result (three keywords of issue-action-impact). The story is better, and the lesson is more valuable when it is not too obvious or generic. Many of the best lessons are on human 'implementation issues.' You should be able to state the lesson(s) learned in a few sentences and provide verifiable results that are evidence of the lesson(s). While identifying the lessons might look easy, both availability of time and expertise in capturing the lessons are challenging, and indeed their reuse appears limited. Implementing a new approach comes with its own challenges and learnings and UNICEF's experience is summarized in Table 1.

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Table 1: Success factors and challenges in implementing the UNICEF's approach

Success factors	Challenges
- Establishment of a dedicated community of practice with more than 100 members from +50 offices - Dedicated community manager with additional budget for small knowledge exchange projects - Senior management support (to the COVID-19 documentation secretariat) - Cross-sectoral collaboration within the offices and beyond - Better use of digital platforms and online tools to collect lessons (some of the tools from UNICEF Knowledge Exchange Toolbox). e.g. KM team used the Yammer for "Working Out Loud" online discussions/practices. Other teams are also using digital platforms such as U-Report[1], RapidPro[2], Internet of Good Things (IoGT)[3], Magic Box[4] etc. to collect lessons. - Establishment of online/offline knowledge sharing/exchange routines	- Documentation can be costly and time-consuming. e.g. budget requirement for recruiting external consultants. - Limited documentation of failures – more focus on presenting the good practices rather than sharing challenges - UNICEF is a very decentralized organization: many initiatives are happening independently and are disconnected. Identification of the lessons remains a challenge. - Geographic vs. sectoral dimensions at all levels: there are office-wide initiatives (e.g. the Regional Offices, or the Country Offices) as well as sectoral level ones (e.g. health in a Regional Office, health in a Country Office) and sometimes they are not necessarily well-coordinated - Difficulty in identifying the use-cases and duplication of good practices, and as a result, the incorporation of COVID-19 lessons learned in future projects might be limited - A balance between too much technical explanation vs. consideration of public audience

Conclusions

To realize UNICEF's vision as an organization that puts knowledge to work to achieve results for children and fulfill their rights, embedding learning from experience and reuse of knowledge and evidence is a critical success factor. On the above 5-step approach, our role is to establish an enabling environment and facilitate progress by providing high-quality tools and techniques. Approaches that enable systematic documentation of practices and knowledge transfer will improve the learning among staff and offices, thus helping UNICEF better address humanitarian crises such as COVID-19 and accelerate strategic results for children. In the long-term, the sustainability of the process relies on widely institutionalized

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[1] https://www.unicef.org/innovation/U-Report
[2] https://www.unicef.org/innovation/rapidpro
[3] https://www.unicef.org/innovation/IoGT
[4] https://www.unicef.org/innovation/Magicbox

and embedded documentation and evidence generation routines. This requires leadership support, dedicated resources, and a strong culture of collaboration. To conclude, citing a pertinent quote by Millar (2019: 11): 'I see a crisis before us. An evidence crisis. I want to convince you that evidence – which is different from data, information, or facts – is critical to accountability, identity, and memory, and ultimately to democracy. If we are going to survive these perilous times for the world – and they are perilous – we need evidence.'

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About the authors

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