African Evaluation Journal
ISSN: (Online) 2306-5133, (Print) 2310-4988

Employing child-focused evaluation methods across West and Central Africa – A UNICEF Experience

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Dates:
Received: 18 Dec. 2023
Accepted: 15 May 2024
Published: 14 Aug. 2024

How to cite this article:
Ahamed, D. & Tarsilla, M., 2024, 'Employing child-focused evaluation methods across West and Central Africa – A UNICEF Experience', *African Evaluation Journal* 12(1), a723. https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v12i1.723

Background: This article explores the strategies that the UNICEF West and Central Africa Regional Office (WCARO) has implemented in order to fulfil children's rights through evaluations.

Objectives: It intends to support evaluation managers and practitioners by discussing challenges and proposed corrective actions encountered when adapting adult-centric evaluation processes into child-friendly ones, both in development and humanitarian settings.

Method: The UNICEF WCARO leveraged on insights shared by evaluation practitioners, academics, and children's organisation representatives during the 2019 Symposium on Child-Centred Evaluations held in Senegal. Three years later, it led to a series of reflective sessions between UNICEF evaluation managers and external consultants to capture lessons learned and insights to improve evaluation practice.

Results: The UNICEF WCARO's evaluation practice has shifted from a rather marginal integration of child-focused methods in its evaluations to a more substantial mainstreaming of such methods. This article highlights how important it is to engage children during all key phases, while keeping ethical considerations into account.

Conclusion: Implementing child-focused evaluations enhances the inclusivity of evaluation processes under the prism of 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, this article underscores the significance of integrating children's perspectives to strengthen equity-based approaches in contemporary evaluation and enhance the validity of evaluation results.

Contribution: This article contributes practical insights and tips on adapting data collection tools for children, fostering active participation, and navigating ethical considerations. UNICEF WCARO's experience serves as a valuable reference for organisations seeking to amplify the voices of the most vulnerable in their evaluation processes.

Keywords: child-focussed evaluation; equity-based approaches; children; inclusivity; data collection tools; UNICEF West and Central Africa Region; sustainable development goals; African context.

Introduction

In alignment with the principle of 'Leaving No One Behind' and the predicaments of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda (United Nations 2017), evaluation professionals have been called upon to better capture the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups and to effectively integrate them in the course of evaluation processes (from the design to the dissemination phase). Such a pursuit has been all the more relevant during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis when the tendency to conduct remote data collection risked undermining equity principles in light of risk considerations as well as limited financial and human resources (United Nations' Children Fund [UNICEF] 2020; UNODC 2020).

In response to such urgent need for upholding equity in evaluation at all times, this article intends to provide the reader with a series of lessons learned and strategy tips on how to best engage with children in evaluation. However, before moving forward, it is critical to clarify the definition of a few terms used in this article. Firstly, 'participatory evaluation' is a specific evaluation approach in which the evaluator engages actively with stakeholders throughout the planning, data collection, analysis and decision-making phases of the evaluation process (Cousins & Whitmore 1998). This approach emphasises the involvement of those who is directly affected by or have a

Note: Special Collection: UNICEF Engaging with Children and Young People. The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Engaging with Children and Young People in Evaluation Towards a More Equitable World,' under the expert guidance of guest editors Dr. Michele Tarsilla and Mrs. Dalila Ahamed.

significant interest in the programme, policy or project being evaluated. The aim is to make the evaluation process more inclusive, democratic and useful to all participants, thereby enhancing the accuracy and credibility of the evaluation outcomes (Whitmore 1998). Secondly, despite being often ascribed to the family of participatory evaluations, the 'equity-based evaluation' approach specifically focusses on assessing the fairness and justice of a programme and/or policy's processes and outcomes, especially in terms of how they affect underserved or marginalised groups. Such approach entails analysing the distribution of benefits and burdens among various stakeholders, with an aim to identify and address disparities, inequities, power and gender dynamics (Mertens 2009; Thomas & Madison 2010). It has the peculiarity of assessing the value, merit and worth (Scriven 1991) of programmes, policies and interventions from the perspective of children's rights, well-being and development. As such, it prioritises the interests, needs and voices of children, ensuring that their outcomes and experiences are the primary focus of the evaluation. This approach often involves methodologies that are sensitive to children's ages, developmental stages and unique contexts, incorporating child-friendly and participatory techniques to gather data directly from children themselves (Bell 2014)

In spite of a flourishing body of grey literature, the meaningful engagement of vulnerable and marginalised groups in evaluations has been lower than expected (UNWomen 2016). In particular, there is an apparent need for ensuring that data collection tools (both quantitative and qualitative) be not only tailored to the complexity of the context where the evidence is being gathered but also be fit to capture the unique experiences and realities lived by the most vulnerable and marginalised groups (Landsdown 2011). Taking into account these dimensions is all the more critical in those countries that are continuously confronted with a host of unique challenges affecting access to and demand for basic services such as in the case of the African context (Hood, Hopson & Frierson 2015). As such, there are certain strategies that could be pursued to enhance the active contribution of the most marginalised and vulnerable to evidence generation.

In light of this, child-focussed evaluations, that is, evaluations where age-appropriate participatory methods are used have proven particularly promising in several contexts within international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and other settings in the West and Central Africa Region (Save the Children, Plan International, etc). The United Nations' Children Fund (UNICEF), for instance, in accordance to both its mandate and the normative requirements spelled out in the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), have undertaken quite a large number of programme evaluations that succeeded in bringing to the surface the voices (as well as the needs and aspirations) of children and young people involved, among others, in education, child protection, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) and resilience building programme. (UNICEF Evaluation Database, accessed 02 April 2024). While the data collected from the perspective of children have been helpful in driving forward programme adjustments and conveying clear messages to technocrats, no formal study has been conducted as of yet on how this has contributed to strengthening policy making processes. However, conversations with UNICEF country staff have confirmed that the integration of children in evaluation and a number of other processes (including the conduct of needs assessment and planning exercises) has become widely accepted (and expected) both among UNICEF staff and in-country government partners.

Integrating child-focussed methods is not an extraordinary evaluation strategy but simply a conscientious use of resources and methodological adaptations abiding by two CRC foundational articles: Article12 (*The right to children to express themselves and communicate their views on all matters affecting them*) and Article 13 (*The right to express themselves through any means necessary, either in writing and verbally, formally or creatively*). However, like any equity-based evaluation (Bamberger & Segone 2011), child-focussed evaluations require the adoption of a sensitive approach based on the recognition, celebration and involvement of different groups of children (children with disabilities, street children, out of school children, children living in conflict-ridden settings and more) in the evaluation process.

In spite of the rather vast body of literature on participatory evaluation and notwithstanding the guidance documents on how to evaluate the SDG agenda (UNDESA 2017), the UNICEF West and Central Africa Regional Office (WCARO) organised a symposium in December 2019 whose objective was to take stock of the scholarly work and professional practices specifically in the area of child-focussed evaluation. The event, which brought together 100 evaluation practitioners, academics and representatives of children's organisations, allowed raising awareness on the need for engaging more systematically with children in evaluation and laid down both the theoretical foundations and practical recommendations to help practitioners become more involved in this specific area of work. Recognising the vast array of challenges associated with this type of evaluation work, including the ethical ones, the event has tried to send an important message to all the participants as well as to the broader evaluation community, while evaluations in the past have often dismissed children altogether during data collection or have allowed adults to speak on behalf of children ('evaluations on' or 'evaluation about' children respectively), the need is there for launching evaluation ***with*** children and young people or even led ***by*** children and young people (Tarsilla 2022). This article is an attempt to share lessons learned from UNICEF WCARO's experience in applying the gained insights and driving forward the agenda for more child inclusive evaluations. The article builds on insights and findings from the Symposium (specifically on the use of methods and considerations to take into account) as well as on a number of follow-up conversations held among UNICEF evaluation managers and deep-dives on child-focussed evaluation work sessions organised by UNICEF evaluation staff with external evaluators to assess how child-focussed methods were applied in UNICEF evaluations during 2020–2022, and what strategically and operationally relevant lessons were drawn from this experience.

It is worth mentioning that the work done by UNICEF in this area has been inspired by a variety of theoretical frameworks rooted in the child psychology realm. The authors themselves have grounded their inquiry on Piaget's work on children's cognitive development, according to which children develop their intellectual (or cognitive) development in four phases: *sensorimotor* (birth through 2 years old), *preoperational* (toddlerhood through early childhood 2–7 years old), *concrete operational* (ages 7–11 years old) and *formal operational* (adolescence through adulthood, 12 years and older). In particular, the authors have focussed on the third and fourth phases and have tried to develop and implement tools that are aligned with what Piaget described as key features of children's cognitive development for those specific phases (see Table 1) (Piaget 1936).

Taking the foregoing into account, this article seeks to explore UNICEF WCARO's progress in enhancing evaluation utilisation through the integration of child-centred approaches. It highlights the importance of systematically incorporating children's participation in evaluations and tackles the distinctive methodological and situational hurdles drawn from applications in the West and Central African region with the aim to contributing to a transformative evaluation practice.

Methodology

This article is based on a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and conversations held during the 'Child Focussed Evaluation' symposium organised in Dakar (Senegal) in December 2019, UNICEF WCARO, where 100 evaluation practitioners, academics, and representatives from children's organisation voluntarily registered for (after the event was widely publicised in Dakar and the West and Central Africa Region) and a review of UNICEF WCARO's Evaluation Reports that have integrated child-centred methods and approaches between February 2020 and December 2022.

Focus group discussions and conversations held with the symposium participants enabled to influence the introduction of the practice in a more systematic way and revolved around the type of approaches, which were most fit for the WCAR context within UNICEF and specific ethical and operational considerations to take into account. Subsequently, altogether, a dozen of evaluation reports were identified and reviewed taking into account the process leading to the use of specific child-centred methods. Exchanges were articulated around the following thematics:

TABLE 1: Piaget's stages of cognitive development.

Stage	Age range	Children's cognitive development features
Concrete operational	7–11 years old	Children need to attach concepts to concrete situations. They could understand time, space and quantity but not as independent concepts.
Formal operational	11 years and older	Children start understanding theories, hypotheses and counterfactuals. They could also start reasoning, including through abstract. They could also start planning and strategise besides applying concepts from one context to another.

Source: Piaget, J., 1936, *Origins of intelligence in the child*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London

- Building common understanding around the need, urgency and benefit to use such approach.
- Any action taken to strengthen the capacity of investigators and/or consultants to use such method.
- How ethical issues around the identification of rightsholders and issues related to consent and voluntary participation have been addressed.
- Any identified challenges and adopted mitigation measures.

The insights gathered from the overall process (which occurred over a period of 2 years) and the final analysis led to the identification of key methods and specific challenges to take into account when designing and conducting any evaluation. Hence, the following sections will first discuss the UNICEF WCARO experience and highlight a few insights which may be useful for evaluation practitioners.

Premise of the article: The United Nations' Children Fund West and Central Africa Regional Office experience

The challenges of implementing equity-based evaluations have been fully documented (Bamberger & Segone 2011). Based on a cursory Google search, a vast array of guidance and documents are available, detailing the ethical requirements as well as orientations on which and what type of tools to use. However, less has been written on the specific challenges of conducting child-focussed evaluation, which is still part of equity-based evaluation (UNICEF 2024). While notable progress has been made over the years in integrating the voices of vulnerable groups into evaluation processes (more during the data collection phase than the data analysis), the engagement with children in evaluation – as UNICEF primary stakeholders – had not always been possible in the West and Central Africa Region because of hesitancy, lack of knowledge and ethical and contextual risk management (e.g., security and safety issues, risk of stigmatisation because of the topic being discussed, the involvement of girls in certain communities, etc.).

The challenges of integrating child focussed methods in evaluations include the need to understand the implication of child developmental stages in the evaluation process, the ability to engage with children and a willingness to consider power dynamics between children, youth and adults that are inherent to African communities (Ofosu-Kusi 2017). Like in any other types of evaluations (i.e., adult-centred evaluations), a quality and useful child-focussed evaluation relies on set of internationally known and agreed principles (African Evaluation Principles 2021), which are based on evaluator's competencies to be open, culturally sensitive and be a keen facilitator.

While the evaluators' understanding of the importance of engaging with children if essential, as well their methodological versatility and good disposition to implement ludic activities during data collection with children is imperative, the strict compliance with ethical principles is a pre-condition for undertaking this type of

work. It is, indeed, the evaluators' responsibility to prevent any risk of harm, in any shape or form (Ethical Research Involving Children 2018; Alderson & Morrow 2011), by also making sure that both consent and assent are obtained and that children can participate in adequate conditions (Mayne, Howitt & Rennie 2016).

While concepts and benefits for child-focussed evaluations have been discussed, the next section will discuss on 'how to do it in reality'. Practice has shown that making data collection tools child-friendly can be challenging because of several reasons. Firstly, children have different cognitive abilities and developmental stages, which means that the language, format and design of data collection tools must be age-appropriate and their content be adapted accordingly so as to allow any child exposed to any given method to easily understand it (Greene & Hill 2005). In practice, while a fun drawing activity aimed at assessing impact may work with children under the age of 12, the same activity would not work as well with adolescents who may not only judge the activity too childish for them to participate but also feel offended that the evaluator has tried to engage them in such a 'simple' and 'belittling' activity, Secondly, children may not have the necessary communication skills to express themselves clearly, which requires data collection tools to be designed to elicit accurate responses (that is even true for out-of-school children who may not have been used to having to explain their feelings and thoughts in front of a group, as may be the case of pupils in schools) (Clark 2005). Thirdly, children may have limited attention spans, and data collection tools must be designed to keep them engaged and interested throughout the process (hence, the need for using game-like activities throughout a data collection and analysis activity implemented as part of a child-focussed evaluation). Fourthly and lastly, data collection tools must be designed to be easily understood and used by, equally, the participants and the enumerators locally, which may require additional resources, expertise and capacity development. In light of these challenges, evaluation teams may be required to take a collaborative approach to understand challenges from different perspectives and adopt a risk management approach to ensure that appropriate mitigating measures are continuously applied to address any arising risk of harm and other issues affecting the participation of children as well as to ensure quality in the data collection process and analysis. This may result in longer preparation phases before considering the launch of a data collection process and regularly adjusting them (UNICEF 2014).

As a result, the data from the UNICEF Evaluation Database (2024) shows that, while in 2019 only a minor portion of evaluations integrated a child-focussed component, from 2021 onwards, more than 50% of evaluations commissioned by UNICEF WCAR comprised a child-focussed data collection tool in the form of adapted and contextualised method and/or inclusion of children in the data collection efforts. This experience has generated a set of lessons learned, which have positively affected and improved the evaluation practice within UNICEF West and Central Africa Region through its different phases (design and planning, data collection, data analysis, dissemination). The following section highlights some the most common corrective actions taken to turn existing data collection tools, considered to be too adult centric,[1] into child-friendly ones.

A few tips on how to make data collection tools child friendly

This section highlights the most recurring corrective actions that the authors have implemented with the scope of their evaluation oversight and quality assurance work in the UNICEF West and Central African Regional Office. Both authors reviewed all the UNICEF child-focussed evaluations conducted in the region between 2020–2022. Furthermore, by delving into the data collection instruments presented in the annexes of the inception reports submitted by external evaluation teams, they took note of all the adjustments made to the tools during the work session held with the external consultants. The overall intent of such iterations was to turn what looked at first as an ordinary data collection tool into a more appropriate and child-friendly method, which could take into account – among others – the age and level of literacy of the children that the tool was aimed to be used with, as well as the social and cultural norms of the context where such tools were expected to be employed.

1. **Include an introduction which presents the evaluator, his and/or her reason for being there, what is asked of them with the aim to establish a safe space:** while having an introduction is good practice, setting the premises with children is key to creating a conducive environment for exchange and openness and building trust. Having a fun and welcoming tone is key to creating a non-threatening atmosphere. For instance, allowing children to ask questions for a few minutes at the beginning is also a way to make sure they understand the purpose and making the evaluator more approachable by reversing the adult-child dynamic.
2. **Replace interrogation-style questions with simpler questions that would engage children in a real dialogue between 'equals':** most often, questions to adults include abstract and globalising themes with complex thought process (such as in the case of recall questions, need-based questions). Children, given their limited attention span (Moyer 1954) and depending on their age range, may prefer questions to be broken down in smaller and more manageable sequenced sections with the addition of probing questions to clarify and understand better the whys and the hows behind their answers. In that respect, it may also be useful to insert probing questions or themes

1.As a reminder, adult-centric methods generally appear to be particularly extractive; although there is a certain recognition of respondents' or interviewees' agency, evaluators tend to have a pretty rigid posture when it comes to obtaining information on the ground to address their evaluation questions. Likewise, the time spent by evaluators to familiarise themselves with their respondents or interviewees is quite limited, and after a few minutes of introducing the evaluation, they jump right into the question-asking phase. Finally, adult-centric methods are not adjusted to the different age ranges of the stakeholders whom they expected to be employed with (adjustments are often – but not always – made).

as instructions for interviewers to be aware of and interact accordingly with children on the type of follow-up questions to ask.

3. **Favour active and situation-based questions:** wherever possible, replace questions around potential situations, consequences and beliefs (how they feel and think) with examples of situations they are likely to face or could face to get their immediate reactions (about what they would do, how they would behave, etc.) and engage the conversation on the reason behind their reactions (why they would act this way and because of what).
4. **Provide visual aids and/or game-like elements:** Further to point 2, this may lead to incorporate as part of the guide a visually appealing tool or practical exercises (such as body mapping, H Framework, sticky boards), which needs children active participation (preferably in smaller groups) through drawing, writing, scribbling, among others. This works particularly well when probing children on results, effects and impacts of a given intervention. The use of adapted Likert-scale (such as the Snail, the Smileys, colour-coding, etc.) is also a good practice into identifying the nuances behind children's responses.
5. **Keep away from formal terminology and adult-centred language by:** avoiding acronyms, development language and complex formulations.
6. **Prefer commonly used terminology:** relating the interventions to services or places used by children to make it more palpable for them (e.g., instead of 'Education', talk about 'classes and schools', 'teachers') and make sure to clarify terminology that they may hear in the community, at home or at school (e.g., child marriage, open defecation, birth registration, etc.).

Lessons learned

This section highlights a few lessons learned[2] and insights gained from initiating and promoting child-centred evaluation in the West and Central Africa region at UNICEF. These lessons learned were identified through in-depth conversations between the evaluators conducting child-focussed evaluations and the respective evaluation managers (three such meetings were systematically held in the course of every evaluation), while the lessons learned presented here are derived of specific experiences in precise contexts (both development and humanitarian settings), the authors have focussed on those aspects and/or dimensions that are susceptible of being more widely applicable to a large variety of settings. Based on an accurate review of the challenges experienced during the management and conduct of child-focussed evaluations conducted in the past, the lessons learned listed below aim to illustrate strategies that could either prevent or mitigate the plausible risks associated with the implementation of such approach. In determining what lessons learned to present in this article, the authors adapted the definition developed by Patton (2001) and privileged those that: a) emerged across a variety of evaluations and settings, b) are not repetitions of common knowledge and c) are grounded on the practical wisdom and experience developed by practitioners. These lessons learned, included in the UNICEF regional evaluation guidance and distributed to all Country Office and regions interested, in pursuing a child-focussed evaluation are currently being mainstreamed in all ongoing and upcoming UNICEF evaluations in West and Central Africa region.

2.According to the definition of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC 2010), lessons Learned are 'Generalizations based on evaluation experiences with projects, programmes, or policies that abstract from the specific circumstances to broader situations. Frequently, lessons highlight strengths or weaknesses in preparation, design, and implementation that affect performance, outcome, and impact'.

Lesson Learned to be applied during the evaluation design and planning phase

Consider active participation of children in the different phases of the evaluation

Involving children ahead of the data collection will oftentimes give validity and credibility to the methodology and the design of the data collection tools as it will enable to adjust and review some of the challenges highlighted above in a real-time manner. Whenever possible, it is highly advisable to work in partnership with youth-led organisations accustomed to data collection processes, youth-led evaluation networks, networks of localised peer-researchers such as in Sierra Leone of one of the COVID-19 Real-Time Evaluations (UNICEF Evaluation Database, 2020). This can be done through their active participation in reference groups and/or steering committees from the onset and/or as part of data collection teams such as in Togo during an evaluation of the Child Friendly Schools (UNICEF Evaluation Database, 2019) where members of child parliament were enrolled as peer evaluators to review and adjust the data collection tools and assist the evaluation in conducting both the H Framework and the body mapping.

Consider in-country context and ethical procedures

Depending on the context, the involvement of children is not always well received among country stakeholders and necessitates additional awareness raising. This has been mostly the case where the evaluation deals with a certain humanitarian and security context such as in the Central Sahel. The role of the Evaluation Reference Group is crucial in building ownership and buy-in at national level through preparatory sessions with the Government to discuss and justify the use of child-centred methods before submitting a formal ethical clearance request.

Lesson Learned to be applied during the drafting and testing of evaluation data collection tools

Test data collection tools with children

Like any other tool, pilot testing is key to determine the usefulness and adequacy of the data collection tools. In particular, the pilot testing will tell the evaluator if it has been sufficiently adapted if the language is appropriate and whether it is conducive to dialogue with children.

Lesson Learned to be applied during the evaluation data collection and analysis

Do not hesitate to partner with organisations used to work with children

One way to facilitate assent and informed consent is to work directly with organisations that are known to be working with children (e.g., schools, youth organisations, etc.) in order to help identify children. This is all the more relevant in cases where specific groups of children such as displaced children, out of school children, children living with disabilities need to be identified. This was particularly the case for COVID-19 evaluations (Sierra Leone, Togo) and when trying to identify out of school children and adolescents (Benin, Ghana, Central African Republic [RCA], Burkina Faso).

Interpreting and using collected data

Increased attention over the way the data collected with children is being used, interpreted and incorporated in findings from multiple sources is necessary to ensure that the child focussed data will contribute to the formulation of findings and recommendations. This aspect should ideally be discussed from the onset with the Evaluation Reference Group and a clear data analysis plan (via the Evaluation Matric, Rubrics, etc.) should be clarified in order to avoid loss of data.

Conclusion

The use of child-friendly methods and strategies to promote greater inclusivity and diversity of children's perspectives into evaluations ensures that children can participate fully and equally to decision-making processes. It enables to widen the scope of analysis by allowing different points of view to be taken into account, strengthen the equity-based approaches and provide greater validity to evaluation results and recommendations. Further, the integration of children's perspectives may contribute to effectively meeting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by involving younger generations in a context, such as in the African Continent, where more the majority of the population is under 25, thus directly informing a more integrated and inclusive approach to evidence generation in shaping a more equitable society for all, where 'no one is left behind'.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge colleagues from cited UNICEF Country Offices who co-managed the cited evaluations, as well as evaluation firms that were commissioned to conduct these evaluations.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

D.A. was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, investigation and writing of the original draft. M.T. was responsible for the review of the article and supervision.

Ethical considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The reports generated and analysed during the current study are available in the UNICEF Evaluation Database repository, accessible via https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/reports. These reports are open to the public. For further inquiries about the data, please contact the corresponding author, D.A.

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