# Data for Children Action Plans: Frequently Found Challenges in Country Offices

Throughout 2018, UNICEF teams in 12 country offices across three regions took part in a pilot project to develop Data for Children Action Plans. The plans were designed to identify the places where UNICEF was best positioned to make impactful investments in the demand, supply, and use of data for children.

While the action plans developed in these contexts were specifically tailored to the needs of each country, an analysis across the contexts revealed several persistent challenges for which current regional and global support is not meeting the needs of country offices. Offices routinely confront challenges in:

## Making data work with governments more effective

1. **Creating a culture of use**

   Across contexts, several offices noted that even when data were available, of appropriate quality, and analyzed in a timely manner, they went unused because there was not a culture of data use either within the relevant ministry or across government as a whole. Offices were repeatedly at a loss about the best ways to address the missing cultural norms of (and political barriers to) data use.

2. **Addressing government sensitivities on data**

   Several country reports identified very high levels of government secrecy, sensitivity, and interference in official statistics as significant barriers to effective data use. Generic attempts to encourage more transparency have been ineffective and offices need specific support in at least two areas: addressing the closing civic space (how to respond to proposals to restrict use of official statistics, etc.) and how to work effectively with a government that may be willing to use data, but not share it openly.

3. **Building capacity to build capacity**

   As within UNICEF offices, government counterparts interact with data in different ways and require different data skills to do their jobs effectively. To address the data skills and savvy gaps within government, UNICEF offices need a) to understand the variety of data skills needed in different civil servant capacities; b) to know what resources are available to help strengthen those capacities; and c) the skills and resources to actually build that capacity as partners of government.

## Supporting country offices to do their work better

4. **Building data savvy within UNICEF offices**

   Offices have identified a range of data skills shortcomings within their offices along with a strong desire and commitment to addressing those gaps. They require support in identifying the appropriate data skills for various functions within an office and charting a course to bring the needed data tools and skills to each type of role in an office.

5. **Improving data communication and advocacy skills**
   While many offices initially cited 'data visualization' as a gap, deeper discussions revealed that many areas of UNICEF data work would be significantly more effective with a more thoughtful communications and advocacy approach to data, including audience identification, simplified analysis and content development, as well as improved visualization. Offices would benefit from a combination of in-house skills and outside support across this spectrum of needs.

6. **Addressing data gaps on key populations, especially historically marginalized groups and geographies**

   While major new investments in data collection were rarely identified as needing investment, there were recurring needs to improve data (and disaggregation) about particularly vulnerable populations and sensitive topics. Offices are aware of these gaps and many ongoing efforts to close them, but continue to struggle in key topic areas.

### Charting a course for (relatively) new areas of data work with UNICEF

7. **Addressing administrative data quality issues**

   There was a strong appetite – and a compelling range of potential use cases – for deepening investments in administrative data. There were, however, accompanying concerns about how to address known data quality issues with administrative data systems. Specifically, the landscape analyses and action plans have identified that support is needed to a) assess the quality of administrative data; b) analyze bottlenecks within administrative data systems; and c) moving toward sustainable data quality improvements.

8. **Unpacking what good likes like when it comes to data interoperability**

   There is a commonly articulated desire for data that work better together – especially in sectors such as child protection, where divided authority within government makes it more important and more difficult to bring data systems together. Governments and offices alike have a clear understanding of the potential value that interoperable data could offer; they do not, however, have clear examples and pathways forward for getting from here to there.

9. **Providing clear, actionable guidance on data privacy, protection, and ethics**

   Many offices and their government counterparts are moving forward very quickly with efforts to make better use of privately held data, create new identity systems, and bring disparate data sources together. While many of these efforts have the potential to benefit children, they are often operating without a clear set of guidance or recommendations on how to ensure that children's unique needs and rights are addressed throughout the process. Offices need very practical, light touch guidance that can work in a diverse set of circumstances immediately, even as the organization moves toward a broad and detailed consensus over a slightly longer time frame.

10. **Understanding and addressing the unique data challenges of humanitarian contexts**

    The challenges of humanitarian data came up in both a general way (desire for faster, higher quality data, etc.) and in highly specific examples across many of the countries in the pilot. There was, however, very limited mezzo level analysis of the challenges regarding data in humanitarian contexts and this needs more dedicated attention from a global level to identify and respond to the frequently found challenges in these contexts.