



Global  
Partnership  
for Sustainable  
Development Data

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# Data for Children Collaborative

**A platform for bringing together data and expertise to solve targeted problems relating to children by bridging data gaps**

## Summary

This case study was developed as part of *Effective Data Sharing: Beyond Platforms*, a study conducted by Athena Infonomics and commissioned by the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data. This project was made possible by a grant from Google.org.

Children today are at risk from problems arising out of climate change, epidemics, and poverty. These challenges are complex and interconnected and cannot be tackled by one organisation. They require a data-driven multidisciplinary approach.

The Data for Children Collaborative ('Collaborative') is a partnership between UNICEF, The Scottish Government, and the University of Edinburgh. The Collaborative seeks to leverage data-driven insights and innovative data science techniques to produce real-world impacts that help the world's children. The Collaborative identifies a 'challenge question' that it

wants to solve and then brings together a team with appropriate data, skills and expertise to work on the project. The Collaborative focuses on demand-driven projects which will impact project design and produce actionable insights that can impact children's lives.

Source: Data for Children Collaborative



## Facts and figures

**Founded:** 2019

**Sector:** Child Welfare

**Typology by use:** Capacity Building and Knowledge Transfer

**Geography:** Global

**Governance Structure:** Data Collaboration

**Number of Member Organisations:** 12 projects with over 25 partners

**Ownership:** It is a partnership between UNICEF, The Scottish Government and the University of Edinburgh and is hosted by the Edinburgh Futures Institute.

## Key Challenge(s) that the initiative was trying to solve

- Bring together appropriate data and expertise to solve challenges affecting children's welfare.
- Improve outcomes for children in 6 areas - nutrition, poverty, population estimation, mental health, climate change and COVID19.

## Key Challenge(s) that the initiative was trying to solve (contd)

- Improve on-ground operational efficiency of UNICEF's team in achieving their targets

## How are they solving the problem?

The Collaborative aims to allow players in the child welfare sector to leverage data science tools and models to solve complex issues. However, it is not easy to identify the correct amount of reliance on data science tools; while for some, data could be the solution to everything, some may avoid data-driven solutions as they seem complicated. Hence, when the Collaborative receives a request from UNICEF or other clients, it tries to understand what problem they are trying to solve, its scope, the Collaborative's capacity to tackle the issue and if it can access the data and the skills needed.

**“Each project has the potential to make a real, positive impact on children’s lives worldwide. Pairing insights with data enable us to better understand what is driving childhood obesity and child poverty, and more accurate population estimates will help develop a widely scalable approach to tackling hugely important issues.”**

In consultation with the client, the Collaborative frames a challenge question that the client seeks to address using innovative data science techniques. It also identifies the necessary skills and datasets required for it. As per the requirements, it poses an expression of interest to build a collaborative team of people from academia, the public sector, and the private sector. All the selected project team members are brought together for a few design thinking workshops to build a project proposal that answers the initial challenge question. At this stage, the Collaborative identifies the proposal for the project, how much time it would require and how much funding each partner is seeking. The proposal is

sent to the board for approval, where the board does a joint review process to ensure that the projects are in alignment with the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and they seek to improve outcomes in children's well-being across the world. Once approved, all the partners sign a collaboration agreement which outlines the roles and responsibilities of the entities and the ownership of the IP.

These agreements require that any IP developed in the project be open; the IP is owned by the institution that develops it; however, it is open for anybody to use.

The three distinct founding partners bring in varied benefits to the Collaborative. UNICEF provides the Collaborative with the contemporary challenge questions confronting on-ground teams. It also assists the Collaborative with its domain expertise and engages with the Collaborative throughout the projects to ensure the successful adoption of the solutions. The University of Edinburgh, along with its academic rigour, provides Collaborative legal, financial, technological, infrastructure and communication support. The Scottish Government provides Collaborative with trust and autonomy. The connection with the government allows their research to influence policy and have a wide-ranging impact.

## What were the key considerations in designing the initiative?

**1. Collaborative solutioning helps unlock the most appropriate data approach:** While developing a data collaboration, the Collaborative works with potential stakeholders to identify a data approach that would best help answer the question posed. The process is iterative and is focused on asking the right questions and then developing an approach that would help answer the question. Data might not always be the answer and working with stakeholders to understand the problem at hand helps identify the most appropriate and multidisciplinary solution.

**“We want to make sure we are asking a question at the right level and that we haven’t presumed the solution to it where the customer already is. We bring them back to [an] earlier stage and say let’s go more open with a question so that we get different brains and a diverse set of people with different interdisciplinary techniques coming together to think about answers. There is a lot of back and forth involved in it.”**

To help with this, the Collaborative has developed a Prioritisation Framework. The framework includes a set of questions that gauge if the project at hand aligns with the Collaborative’s core values and if the Collaborative is well placed to address the challenge. The framework analyses the project’s suitability – if there is an alignment of vision to solve the problem through data science; deliverability – if the Collaborative has the correct data, skills and tools in place; scalability – if the Collaborative has a sponsor to support the project; and portfolio – if success measures can be identified and achieved for the project. Once a challenge question has been approved by the framework, it goes to the governance board for approval. After this, the Collaborative engages in an Impact Collaborations process which refines the team, the budget and the technical approach.

## **2. Ethical assessment of all the projects at every step:**

From the beginning, the Collaborative recognised the ethical challenges that come with working with children’s datasets. The Collaborative created an Ethical Assessment tool to address the ethical challenges at different stages of the project. The assessment goes beyond a legal exercise into the realms of socio-ethical requirements; it goes from things you can or cannot do with data, to the thing you should and should not. It is a self-reflective exercise which requires the partners to think about their motivations and possible ethical issues that can come up at different stages of the project. Some analytical points are data-centric, for example – data collection, security, and anonymisation. However, the assessment goes beyond data-centric issues to understanding the stakeholder’s context and the language used to convey communicating outputs. The assessment has assisted in shaping confidentiality policy for work around HIV and influenced the language to be used for reporting outcomes.

**“There are certain things that you can and can’t do with data, and then there are certain things that you shouldn’t do with data, and that’s where we bring in our ethics assessment. We work with the collaborative teams the whole time to think about the impact positive and negative of their work. So, we try and go beyond that legal requirement into the socio-ethical requirements as well.”**

## Financial Sustainability of the initiative

The Scottish Funding Council and the Data Driven Innovation Programme funded the Collaborative with £3 million for the first 3 years. UNICEF has been the primary organisation that the Collaborative works with. However, the Collaboration aims to become a consultancy where it provides building data collaboratives as a service.

### Lessons Learned

- **The Collaborative used closed-knit focus group discussions to build trust.** The primary barrier in a data-sharing program is to establish trust among the players to ensure a smooth flow of data. The Collaborative used small focus group discussions or workshops to establish a trusted environment. When the partners are brought together for the first time in a workshop or a focus group discussion, they engage in participatory, trust-building exercises which help define their role and motivation. Managing stakeholder engagement with clarity and transparency, which clearly outlines the roles of each member, is crucial for the success of the Collaborative.
- **Demand-driven projects ensure that insights are actionable and impactful.** The Collaborative puts together a team around a specific challenge provided by an implementing entity. Working with the challenge owner in a demand-driven manner that clearly identifies their needs ensures that the teams have a specific use case for sharing data. Second, since the solution is built as per the requirements of an implementing body seeking to enhance its operations, it ensures that the project pro-

duces actionable insights and aids the on-ground efforts.

***“The clear goals and direction of UNICEF are invaluable. The end goal of our research is not just interesting research but also something that has a real-world impact. I think that is the biggest advantage.”***

- Working with local implementation offices and ground truthing the data results is important to tackle bias and ensure usability. Ensuring representativeness of data, identifying bias and building context appropriateness into the projects are important for the success of the Collaborative. While the Collaborative is looking to translate data lessons across countries, there is a recognition that this is not just a data model question. The Collaborative works closely with the UNICEF office in the country of interest to ensure that data solutions developed are informed by, and compatible with, the implementation context.

The Collaborative is a unique partnership that aims to use data to drive outcomes for children and builds safeguards, resources, and protocols that ensure that the data is used ethically and transparently. The focus on specific skills in a project allows individuals from varied backgrounds to come together and contribute to children’s welfare globally. Moving forward, the Collaborative is looking to broaden its client network and explore different funding models.

## Sources

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[Prioritisation Framework](#)

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Stakeholder Interviews

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