

STANDARDS ON SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION FOR UNICEF MANAGED WEBSITES

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1. RATIONALE FOR THIS DOCUMENT

1.1 UNICEF uses its websites to communicate and advocate for children's rights; sharing information and engaging with the public about UNICEF programmes and operations, and conducting online fundraising.

1.2 Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is an essential practice to make UNICEF's web content findable when someone uses a search engine such as Google, Bing or Safari. Approximately 90% of users do not click past the first page of results, so a higher rank is essential to obtain more traffic to a website. It is therefore key that when managing a UNICEF's website there is special attention to SEO.

1.3 These standards, based on best practices, should provide staff with the know-how to optimize their website or request SEO from vendors in line with the **Procedures for Establishing and Managing UNICEF's Public-Facing Websites, Social Media Channels and Mobile Applications.**

2. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

2.1 Making UNICEF web content findable is essential in communicating and advocating online for children's rights.

3. APPLICABILITY AND SCOPE

3.1 These Standards apply to all websites:

- a. that are managed by, or on behalf of, UNICEF;
- b. that are public-facing

whether or not they are UNICEF-branded.

3.2 These Standards also apply to public-facing websites, managed by, or on behalf of, UNICEF for multi-stakeholder partnerships (even if there is no UNICEF branding). These multi-stakeholder partnerships include partnerships for which UNICEF provides support office functions and other partnerships involving government, international organizations, NGO and private sector partners, where UNICEF has agreed to take a lead

role on establishing and/or managing the partnership's website.

3.3 All UNICEF offices – including Country Offices, Regional Offices and Headquarters Offices – are required to follow these standards.

IMPORTANT:

- (a) All Country and Regional offices whose websites are currently hosted in RedDot will be migrated to UNICEF's new Content Management System, which follows the SEO technical standards. **Offices should not change systems in the interim to meet these standards; instead they are encouraged to work on optimizing their content on their current platforms.**
- (b) The SEO standards are applied at different levels. To make it easier, we specify the audience to whom a particular standard is addressed: *
 - Content editor: the person who is responsible for the editorial quality of a website.
 - Writer: the person who writes content for a website. He/she works closely with the content editor.
 - UX/Web designer: the person responsible for the user experience and look and feel of a website.
 - Web developer: the person who develops the code of the website and works on any content management system integration.

*when working with vendors, provide all SEO standards

4. STANDARDS

4.1 CONTENT QUALITY

AUDIENCE: CONTENT EDITORS / WRITERS

Content quality is an important factor in search engine ranking. The major search engines fight spam by penalizing deceptive or misleading practices, therefore poor quality, repetitive content may cause problems. However, sites that produce good quality content that is appealing to users should see long-term ranking benefits.

(a) **Providing high-quality content**

- Ensure all content is well written and well structured. All content should read like it was written by an expert.
- Create content that solves specific problems or answers specific questions that your target audience may have.
- To improve the readability of online content, keep paragraphs short and break

- up content with headings. This will also help to keep users on pages longer.
- Avoid duplicate, overlapping, or redundant content on the same or similar topics with slightly different keyword variations.
 - Check that your grammar and spelling is correct.
 - Avoid click-baiting, the practice of misleading users into clicking through to your website to improve search engine rankings.
 - Update content regularly and remove outdated material. Review older items periodically and include an “updated on” date on the page.
 - Relevant internal links are important to improve ranking in search engines:
 - Avoid short, non-descriptive phrases like “click here,” “more,” or “available online” as the entire link text. Link text should be meaningful enough to make sense when read out of context.
 - Regularly check your internal links to avoid broken ones.
 - Identify pages in your analytics dashboard (e.g. Google Analytics) that have [high bounce rates](#) with a low time spent on the page, and look to improve them. These metrics can be used by Google to measure how satisfied visitors are with your pages.

4.2 KEYWORDS

AUDIENCE: CONTENT EDITORS, WRITERS

Keyword research is one of the most important activities in SEO. It helps you align the content you create with the needs and language of the people you want to communicate with. Ensuring that keywords are prominent in a page’s URLs, titles, descriptions, and headings will help that page rank well for the terms you have researched. Beware of keyword overuse; pages should never read unnaturally due to over-repetition of the same phrases. Similarly, content needs to usefully represent the keywords chosen for the page and should always be written primarily with user needs in mind.

- (a) Look at how your topics are being expressed online to determine what is trending; these terms can assist in determining your keywords.
- (b) Ensure these keyword phrases are everyday language and included in your content.
- (c) Use the Google Keyword Planner (<https://adwords.google.com/KeywordPlanner>) and other available tools to research which keyword phrases are most popular, and their relative competitiveness in terms of other sites targeting them.
- (d) Focus on one unique topic per page – either a single keyword phrase or a main keyword phrase and a few closely related options.
- (e) When translating content into different languages, research new keywords in each language rather than just translating the existing keywords. Recognize that some

words cannot be translated literally into certain languages.

- (f) Include the chosen keywords in the URL (if possible), title, description, and H1 of the page.

4.3 METADATA

AUDIENCE: WEB DEVELOPPERS & CONTENT EDITORS

Metadata descriptions are often used in search engine results as the descriptive text for a particular search result link. A well-crafted metadata description can improve the click-through rate from search engine results (by encouraging people to click on the result) and decrease the bounce rate (by accurately describing what a user will see when following the search result link). Both click-through rates and bounce rates are potentially used as ranking factors by Google.

The keywords field, however, is not relevant to ranking in Google or Bing, and adding too many keywords here may make the page look like spam to search engines. It is therefore advisable not to use this field.

- (a) Ensure that a metadata description in the “meta description” tag is provided for each page of UNICEF sites. The description should:

- Accurately reflect the content of the page and be written compellingly.
- Complement the page’s title, giving further information about the content.
- Be unique to each page.
- Stand alone in search results, as users will not have any context.
- Be under 150 characters, including spaces. This prevents it from being truncated by search engines if used in search results.

- (b) Do not use the “meta keywords” field to add keywords to pages.

4.4 MOBILE

AUDIENCE: WEB DEVELOPERS / WEB DESIGNERS

Mobile devices can represent a significant share of traffic to sites, and are now the primary means by which many people access the Web. It is therefore important to ensure that mobile users get a good experience. Consideration of mobile is also critical from an SEO perspective because Google discriminates in favor of mobile-friendly sites in its mobile search results, and Bing labels mobile-friendly pages in its mobile results.

Here are a few ways to ensure a site is mobile friendly.

- (a) Make sure font sizes and clickable areas are of a usable size when accessed on a mobile device. Text should be comfortably readable and links and buttons should be adequately sized and spaced to be used easily.
- (b) Ensure that your site loads quickly.
- (c) Avoid using Flash or other multimedia players, which are not supported on mobile devices. Use HTML5 standard tags to include videos or animation.
- (d) Avoid using pop-ups because closing them can be difficult on a mobile device, a tendency which may increase your bounce rate.
- ~~(e) Avoid interstitials for promoting UNICEF apps if they disrupt the visitor's experience. Use HTML banners instead.~~
- (f) Ensure that Googlebot can crawl your JavaScript, CSS, and image files by using the "Fetch as Google" feature in Google Webmaster Tools.
- (g) Where you are using a responsive design:
 - Ensure that the mobile viewport is set in the code with the meta name="viewport" tag.
- (h) Where you are using a mobile-only alternative for a site instead of responsive design:
 - Configure your server to return "Vary: User-Agent" HTTP response headers.
 - Use "Rel=Alternate Media" to map between the desktop and mobile versions of pages.
 - Use "Rel=Canonical" for both the desktop and the mobile versions of pages, with the desktop version of the page as the canonical version.
 - Ensure that every desktop URL redirects to the appropriate mobile URL. Avoid redirecting users to the mobile site home page if the mobile site has an equivalent page.
 - Avoid showing 404 error pages on mobile if there is no mobile equivalent for a particular desktop page. Redirect to an appropriate mobile URL or display the desktop page rather than display an error. The Crawl Errors report in Google Webmaster Tools can show you a list of URLs that return smartphone-only 404 errors.
 - Where you have cross-links between mobile and desktop versions of pages, ensure that they are correctly set up to link to the correct URLs.

4.5 TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION

AUDIENCE: WEB DEVELOPERS

Pages that can't be discovered by search engines cannot rank in search results. Having content that is perceived as "duplicate" by search engines can affect how much of your site gets indexed, and in turn your rankings. There are a range of technical SEO issues that must be addressed to avoid any problems with search engines indexing UNICEF sites.

(a) Avoid barriers to indexing

- Ensure that your Content Management System (CMS) creates pages and links that search engines can crawl.
- Make sure that all assets, such as CSS and JavaScript files, are available to be crawled by search engine crawlers.
- Avoid generating links via JavaScript or using images or Flash for navigation.
- Avoid using frames and iframes to present content.
- Set up an XML sitemap for each site and keep it updated.
- Use canonicalization where necessary if you need to publish multiple variants of a page within a single language.

(b) Robots.txt

- Include a robots.txt file in the top-level directory of the website to list any directories on the site that you don't want search engines to crawl, for example, search results pages or other auto-generated content.
- Include a reference to your XML sitemap in the robots.txt file.
- Do not list confidential files in your robots.txt file. Including a file in robots.txt does not guarantee that it will not be crawled. Confidential files need to be appropriately secured.

(c) URLs

- Use human-readable URLs and limit the number of parameters in a URL to no more than two. Complex URLs with multiple dynamic parameters may negatively affect the indexing of your site.
- Avoid using session IDs for search engine spiders. If necessary, detect spiders and switch off URL-based sessions for non-logged-in users.

(d) HTTP headers

- Ensure your web server supports the If-Modified-Since HTTP header. This feature allows your web server to tell all search engines whether your content has

changed since it last crawled your site as the level of user engagement with content is a key indicator of authority to search engines.

- Use 301 permanent redirects for pages that have moved.
- Make use of 404 error pages for pages that no longer exist. To avoid users leaving your website, you should provide navigational options on the error page such as:
 - Search box
 - A link to the homepage
 - Alternative content/links

(e) **Active monitoring of issues**

- Monitor the site's performance and optimize load times.
- Ensure that Google Webmaster Tools and Bing Webmaster Tools accounts are set up for all sites and are monitored.

4.6 **TITLES AND HEADINGS**

AUDIENCE: CONTENT EDITORS, WRITERS

Titles and headings are major indicators to search engines of the content of your web pages. The title tag is the piece of text that appears in the bar at the top of your browser or on the page tab. It is also normally the link text displayed within search engine result listings, so it can improve click-through rates if well crafted. The title and `<h1>` are also important locations for keywords because search engines regard words in these elements as having more value, as indicators of the page's subject.

(a) **Titles**

- Always provide a meaningful, concise page title in the `<title>` tag that reflects the main theme of the page. This text will appear within search results, so make sure it is appealing and descriptive.
- Include UNICEF's name as the last part of the browser title. Doing so enhances brand identity in search result pages and bookmarked URLs. It can also improve click-through rates from search engine results.
- Limit Latin-language title tag length to under 65 characters long, including spaces. Anything longer is liable to be cut off in search engine results. Google may display even fewer characters, so ensure that titles are as short as possible.
- Each title should be unique to the page.
- Include your page keywords within the title tag. Do not waste the title with generic phrases such as "Welcome to ..." or non-descriptive words.

- Do not allow multiple title tags on pages. Doing so can cause unpredictable behaviour within search engine result listings.

(b) Headings

- Include a single <h1> heading on each page that is descriptive of that page.
- Use headings and subheadings to further highlight your keywords for that page.
- Ensure that headings are marked up correctly as <h1>, <h2>, etc. and are not just highlighted using, for example bold or larger text.
- Do not use <h1>, <h2>, etc. to customize the look and feel of content.
- The <h1> heading should be similar to the <title>. When users click through from search engine results, this similarity will reinforce their confidence that they are on the correct page, since the title will have provided the link text they have clicked on and the <h1> is prominent when they arrive on the page. It should therefore reduce bounce rates. However, it is best to avoid automating the <title> and the <h1> to always be exactly the same. Exact duplication may look like spam to a search engine’s content quality algorithms.

5. RESOURCES AND FOCAL POINTS

5.1 Digital Labs is a key resource for realizing UNICEF’s digital strategy for documentation, networking with colleagues, and contacting focal points.

- (a) Digital Labs is also a community of practice where offices will find examples and practices followed by others, which may be helpful when considering establishing or managing a new public-facing website, social media channel or mobile application.
- (b) For each area of digital practice and policy, the contact details of the relevant focal point can be found on Digital Labs.

5.2 For everything else, contact DOC for further advice through via email: digitalgovernance@unicef.org.

DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT INFORMATION PAGE

Document Title	STANDARDS ON SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION FOR UNICEF MANAGED WEBSITES
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Effective Date	May 2017
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Responsible Business Owner	Paloma Escudero, Director DOC
Responsible Manager	Penni Berns, DSS, DOC
Document Summary	<p>UNICEF uses its websites to communicate and advocate for children’s rights; sharing information and engaging with the public about UNICEF programmes and operations and conducting online fundraising. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is an essential practice to make UNICEF’s web content findable when someone uses a search engine such as Google, Bing or Safari.</p> <p>These standards are based on search engine optimization best practices and should provide staff with the know-how to be able to optimize their website or request SEO from vendors.</p>
Applicability	<p>All UNICEF offices – including Country Offices, Regional Offices and Headquarters Offices – are required to follow these Procedures.</p> <p>IMPORTANT NOTE: All Country and Regional offices whose websites are currently hosted in RedDot will be migrated to UNICEF’s new Content Management System, which follows the SEO technical standards. Offices should not change systems in the interim to meet these standards; instead they are encouraged to work on optimizing their content on their current platforms.</p>
Regulatory content the Document Replaces	NA
Reference / Links to Enabling Legislation and Background	<u>Procedures for Establishment and Managing UNICEF's Public-Facing Websites Social Media Channels and Mobile Applications</u>
Links to Relevant Policy	
Links to Relevant Procedure	<u>Procedures for Establishment and Managing UNICEF's Public-Facing Websites Social Media Channels and Mobile Applications</u>
Links to Relevant Guidance	
Links to Relevant Training Materials	<u>Digital Labs</u>
Links to Other Knowledge & Information Resources	
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