



Independent
Evaluation
Office

United Nations Development Programme

UNDP PORTFOLIO EVALUATION GUIDELINES

January 2026

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Definition, positioning and cycle of a UNDP portfolio	2
The Portfolio Results Framework	4
Purpose of a portfolio evaluation	5
Evaluation process and implementation arrangements	8
Timing considerations	11
Budget considerations	12
Annex: Building a portfolio from existing projects and planning its evaluation	12

Introduction

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) adopted a policy for its portfolio approach on 22 March 2024. This Portfolio Policy is accompanied by various guidance notes and templates, are expected to be used during its planning and implementation of a UNDP portfolio.¹

This Portfolio Evaluation Guideline highlights key considerations for evaluating a UNDP portfolio. For comprehensive guidance on planning, designing and conducting a decentralized evaluation, please refer to the [UNDP Evaluation Guidelines](#).

The Guidelines cover the following:

- Definition, positioning and cycle of a UNDP portfolio
- The Portfolio Results Framework
- The purpose of a portfolio evaluation
- The evaluation process and implementation arrangements
- Timing considerations
- Budget considerations
- Annex: Building a portfolio from existing projects and planning its evaluation.

Definition, positioning and cycle of a UNDP portfolio

Definition: A portfolio is defined as a programming delivery instrument that contributes to one or more Country Programme Document (CPD) outcomes and engages one or more implementing partners to address system-level challenges for strategic development results.²

A UNDP portfolio should be understood *as a set of interconnected interventions that work together to deliver strategic development impact*. It is designed, managed, monitored and evaluated under a single, integrated and dynamic operational framework. A mere collection or thematic aggregation of projects is *not* a portfolio, unless there is a clear underlying objective for collective systems transformation or systems synergies that connect relevant efforts across various projects.³

To date, [50 UNDP country offices](#) have worked to create working portfolios to pilot the portfolio approach, covering a variety of thematic areas and approaches.

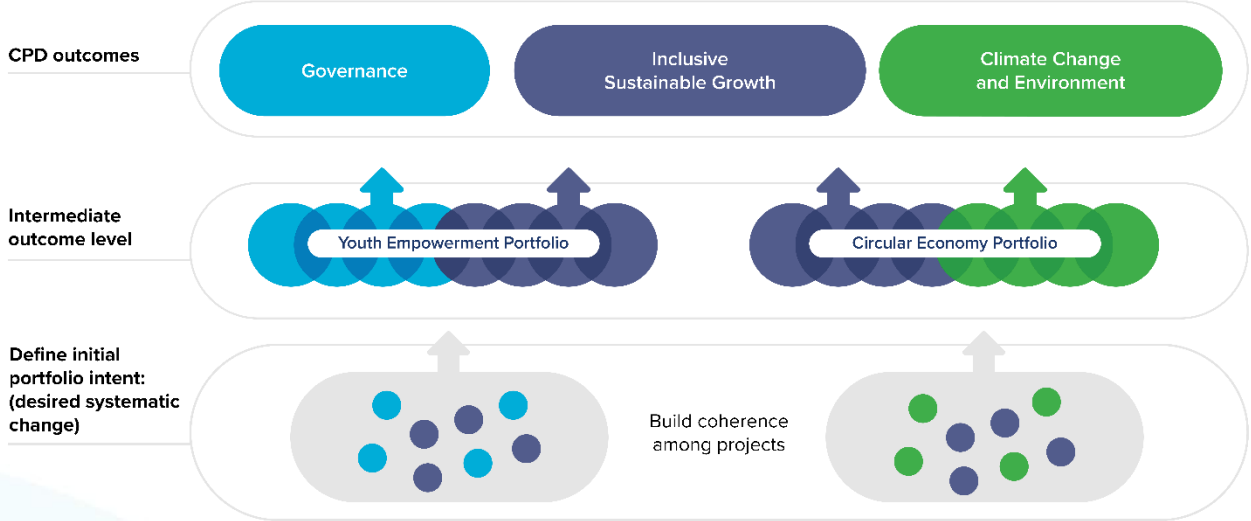
¹ For Portfolio Document Guidance and the related Portfolio documents: Portfolio Document Template; Portfolio and Project Risk Register; Portfolio Board Terms of Reference; On-Granting Provisions Applicable to a non-UNDP Implementing Partner; Portfolio Multi-Year Workplan; and Portfolio Theory of Change, please visit <https://popp.undp.org/policy-page/portfolio>

² What is a portfolio? See Portfolio Policy, p.3.

³ Portfolio Document Guidance, p.6.

Positioning and cycle of a portfolio: Programming results of a UNDP portfolio lie between the CPD outputs and CPD outcomes at the country level. Since a portfolio seeks system-level changes, a portfolio may be implemented over multiple country programme cycles. Figure 1 shows an example of the positioning of portfolios under a CPD Framework using youth empowerment and circular economy portfolios found in the UNDP Compendium of Portfolios.

Figure 1. An example of positioning of portfolios under a CPD framework using youth empowerment and circular economy and circular economy



Source: Independent Evaluation Office

A project or programme typically follows a linear process cycle, i.e. design (with the donor already identified) – implementation – closure, and then restarting the process once again as a separate process cycle. In contrast, a portfolio involves a dynamic, ongoing process of redesign, driven by new learning at each cycle. Specifically, this cycle consists of design/redesign – resource mobilization – implementation – learning, with new donors and partners as co-implementers, potentially joining the effort at each phase and contributing to a shifting focus on systems change. The design/redesign stage of cycle continues until the desired systems change is realized.

The design of a portfolio is reviewed every year to establish its annual targets.⁴

⁴ There are no pre-determined annual results targets for the full duration of a portfolio. Targets are set on an annual basis and approved by the portfolio board (Portfolio Document Guidance, “Portfolio Results Framework”, p.15).

The Portfolio Results Framework

The Portfolio Results Framework identifies the portfolio targets, which are defined at the beginning of the portfolio and revisited during Portfolio Board meetings based on learning and adaptation.

The Portfolio Results Framework: *

- is defined at the beginning of a portfolio and revisited during the portfolio cycle;
- indicates total results generated by all interventions in a portfolio;
- contains a portfolio intent (purpose) and three results categories: System Change, Portfolio Momentum and Portfolio Learning;
- does not identify predetermined annual targets for the full duration of a portfolio, but identifies annual targets set for each year;
- feeds into a corporate reporting process (ROAR) and should take place at least once a year.

* if it exists, use the portfolio's theory of change as a reference (Portfolio Theory of Change, [Portfolio Policy](#)).

The Portfolio Results Framework defines the major purpose of a portfolio, i.e. the portfolio intent, and how it contributes to the country-level strategy found in the CPD. The Results Framework identifies three classifications of portfolio results: System Change, Portfolio Momentum and Portfolio Learning.⁵ Each classification represents a unique level and context where management and portfolio managers can gain insights.

- Results area 1. System Change: These are shifts that the ToC has identified as potentially central to unlocking change (e.g a change in policy, a change in business practices, or a change in budgeting⁶)
- Results area 2. Portfolio Momentum: Underlying momentum of key dynamics central to the success of the portfolio; gradual buildup or signs of emerging changes generated from the aggregation of implementation partners' activities (e.g. signs from implementation partners'

⁵ Portfolio Document Guidance, p. 17-21

⁶ Methods such as the "Most Significant Change" may be used to uncover systems change stories focusing on stakeholders' accounts of changes in policy, practices and capacities, as well as budgeting.
<https://erc.undp.org/methods-center/methods/evaluation-methods/most-significant-change>

interest, resource allocation practices, political will, social networks of the broader ecosystem related to the portfolio intent⁷).

- Results area 3. Portfolio Learning: New learned knowledge instrumental to the success of the portfolio; changes captured during portfolio adaptation (e.g. learning about how a portfolio is managed and governed), system transformation (learning about the theory and methods of portfolio work that are more universally applicable) and policy areas (learning applicable to similar policy challenge areas elsewhere).

Purpose of a portfolio evaluation

Unlike a project evaluation, a portfolio evaluation is considered a strategic evaluation at UNDP, such as an outcome or thematic evaluation.

A portfolio evaluation seeks to:

- establish and provide evidence of how the portfolio intent and approach contribute to its effects and to the achievement of relevant CPD outcome(s);
- build UNDP and its partners' knowledge on how systems change through the portfolio, and on how to systemically address different policy challenges; and
- foster continuous learning among partners throughout a cycle.

A portfolio evaluation, like a CPD outcome evaluation, examines a set of interconnected interventions moving in parallel towards an intended goal. A portfolio evaluation differs from an outcome evaluation however, in two important respects. While the outcome evaluation derives its pre-defined outcome statements from the CPD, for a portfolio, a UNDP country office can define the portfolio intent during a country programme cycle. While an outcome evaluation is bound by one CPD cycle, a portfolio, by design, is expected to evolve over an undetermined duration and possibly across multiple country programme cycles.

The maturity of a portfolio is a critical factor in determining the purpose and scope of the evaluation. For example, in its early stages (at least the first 1–2 years), a portfolio evaluation should focus on *relevance* and *coherence* of the portfolio approach, rather than focus solely on its results or effects. Over time, the process of reviewing a portfolio should inform the development of a more appropriate set of evaluation criteria and standards. This reflects the dynamic nature of development interventions envisioned in the portfolio approach, where coordinated efforts of multiple new and existing evolving actors are expected to generate synergetic change, rather than being limited to the agenda of one project, actor or donor.

Table 1 presents a set of evaluation considerations for a newly established portfolio, organized by stage. If a portfolio is established from ongoing projects, then the evaluation should account for the maturity of these projects when determining its purpose and scope.

⁷ Social Network Analysis can be used to assess the strength of communication and interaction in a network associated with a portfolio. <https://erc.undp.org/methods-center/methods/evaluation-methods/social-network-analysis>

Figure 2. Evaluation considerations throughout the stages of a portfolio

Early stage:

The portfolio defines its purpose (i.e. the 'portfolio intent'), how it aligns with CPD outcome and the systemic change to be achieved.

The country office negotiates with donors and partners for potential areas/levels of contributions.

-  Design relevance
-  Resource mobilization
-  Partner engagement and collaboration
-  Complementarity and coherence within UNDP and with partners

Evaluation considerations

Relevance of the portfolio approach:

Determine if it has the potential to achieve its purpose (portfolio intent) and contribute to CPD outcome(s), including the required level of resource mobilization and the extent of partner engagement and collaboration.

Design coherence:

Determine internal coherence -including interlinkages of existing programmes, projects and activities within UNDP to achieve portfolio intent and its contribution to achieving the CPD outcome(s).

Determine external coherence-including complementarity with the work of other United Nations/partner agencies.




Implementation to mature stage:

The portfolio implements planned interventions, tests its assumptions, and applies accumulated knowledge and learning in the redesigning of the portfolio approach as necessary.

The portfolio cycle continues until its mature stages (donor interest, continuation of learning).

Expected portfolio evolution:

- a. The portfolio intervention mix demonstrates collaboration across portfolio partners.
- b. Alignment of the portfolio intervention with a deeper understanding of the complex challenges and systems.
- c. Changes across portfolio partners such as through competencies, funds and people, relationships with partners, organizational changes to enable the portfolio approach).
- d. Systemic changes

-  Delivery of interventions depending on maturity
-  Learning
-  Re-design of a portfolio

Evaluation considerations



Implementation performance:

Assess the extent of results achieved and learning taking shape. (Note the three results areas in the Portfolio Results Framework – Portfolio Learning, Portfolio Momentum and System Change.)

Note: The following questions may be useful in capturing changes:

- How has learning been used in the portfolio's decisions and implementation?
- How have the portfolio assumptions evolved with the learning?
- What progress has been made against the portfolio's Results Framework?
- To what extent is the portfolio making a difference? Under what circumstances? For whom/where? How do these changes align with the portfolio intent?
- What systemic changes were generated from the portfolio?
- To what extent are these changes sustainable?
- To what extent has the portfolio approach been integrated into the work of the UNDP country office and partners? Are there any areas of vulnerabilities (e.g. resistance)?
- How did the portfolio contribute to the overall CPD outcome results chain?

Evaluation process and implementation arrangements

Portfolio evaluations should adhere to standard evaluation practices and processes as guided by the UNDP Evaluation Guidelines. Implementation arrangements may vary, however, due to the broader range of stakeholders and actors involved. A joint evaluation with the government or other partners may also be considered if expectations align. If a joint evaluation or collaborative approach is planned, the terms of reference (ToR) should clearly explain the rationale and outline measures to prevent any conflict of interest.

The evaluation plan for a portfolio is required at the time of its approval. Resources must be allocated for portfolio evaluation in the portfolio budget.⁸

Under the portfolio approach, implementing partners have a significant role, working closely with the portfolio management team to support the evolution of the portfolio evaluation process.⁹ They are accountable for specific system change outputs (i.e. shifts), and carry out activities that drive portfolio momentum and generate portfolio learning.

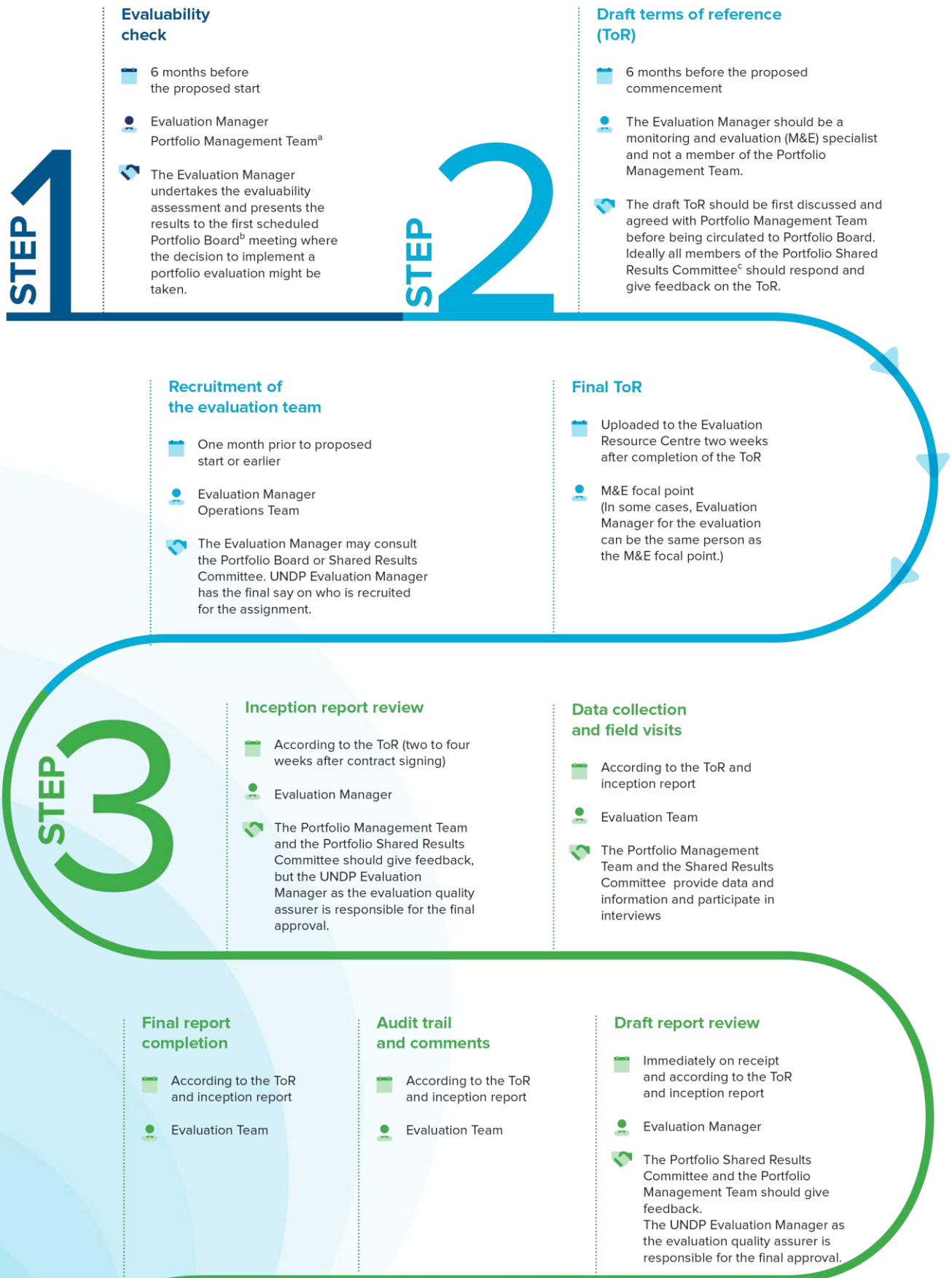
The evaluation manager of a portfolio evaluation is expected to play a critical coordination role throughout the evaluation process, including during the initial stage of defining the evaluation's purpose to reflect both the maturity level of the portfolio under review and its learning needs. (See Table 1)

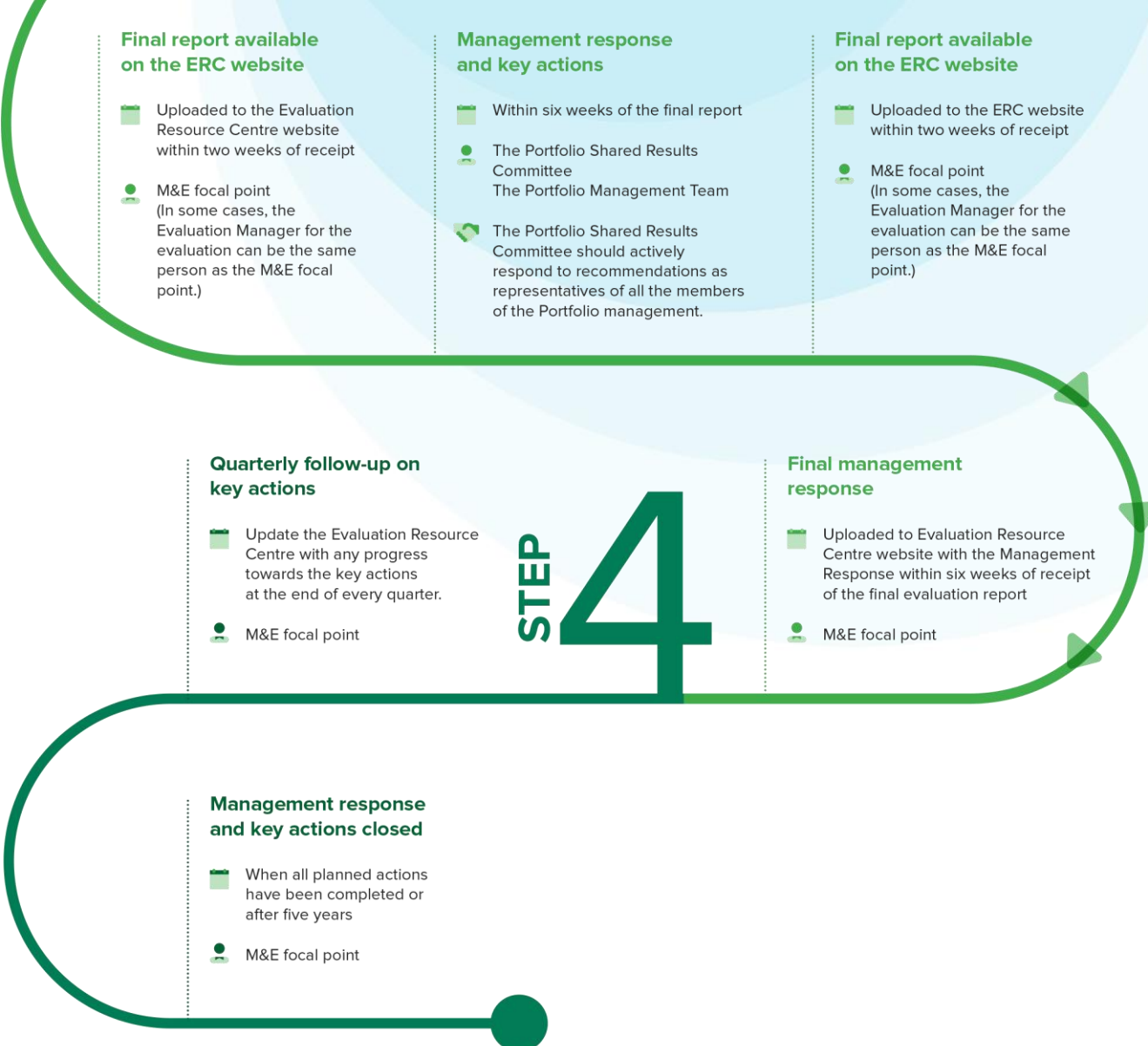
Quality Assessment of Portfolio Evaluations: A portfolio evaluation is subject to a quality assurance process, as with any decentralized evaluation conducted in accordance with the UNDP Evaluation Guidelines.

⁸ As with other decentralized evaluations, portfolio evaluations, once planned, should be reflected in the overall business unit's evaluation plan, including its budget. See: Portfolio Evaluation, Portfolio Policy, p.16.

⁹ Portfolio Document Guidance, Section 6. Implementing partner(s) role(s) and plan, p.34.

Table 1. Stages of the Portfolio Evaluation Process





Notes:

- ^a Portfolio Management Team manages the day-to-day planning, coordination and administration of the portfolio and its resources. It reports to the Portfolio Board and supports Board members in effectively fulfilling their roles.
- ^b Portfolio Board provides high-level strategic direction and steering for the design and implementation of the portfolio and decides on the suspension of or extension of the portfolio and approves any new implementing partners and their multi-year work plan(s).

- Portfolio Shared Results Committee consists of representatives of all implementing partners, led by the portfolio manager or UNDP Senior Management (Resident Representative/Deputy Resident Representative); works collaboratively to review the implementing partners' work plans; actively contributes to collective portfolio learning and shared results, and facilitates the dynamic improvement of the portfolio and its associated work plans; is responsible for taking corrective actions, including revisions to the work plans (e.g. integrating ongoing projects outside of the portfolio, within it), budget revisions, requests for suspension or extension, and other major changes to the work plans (subject to additional funding partner/donor requirements).

Timing considerations

While CPD outcomes are defined at the outset of a country programme cycle, following the development of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) by the United Nations Country Team, a portfolio may be developed or defined at any point during the CPD cycle. Given that portfolio cycles may extend beyond a single CPD period, UNDP country offices have the discretion to determine the appropriate timing for a portfolio evaluation. Once planned, the portfolio evaluation should be added to the Evaluation Plan of the country office (or any programme office submitting the Evaluation Plan) and uploaded to the Evaluation Resource Centre (ERC) website.

Portfolios are typically dynamic, evolving clusters of work that continue as long as their interventions receive funding. Consequently, the timing of a portfolio evaluation cannot follow the conventional scheduling of project-level evaluations, such as fixed mid-term or end-line assessments; instead, the timing of a portfolio evaluation should be informed by several factors, as follows:¹⁰

- the maturity of the portfolio, for example, the early design stage, or the more mature implementation stage, since a certain level of maturity may be required to meaningfully assess progress and results; and
- the strategic need for learning, particularly when insights are needed to inform broader evaluations such as an Independent Country Programme Evaluation (ICPE) for the next CPD cycle.

The Results Framework of a portfolio is a critical tool for a country office to determine the maturity of the portfolio and timing of the evaluation. A portfolio evaluation can be initiated at any of the three results levels. However, it is recommended to conduct the evaluation when there are demonstrable and meaningful results – system change, portfolio momentum and portfolio learning – to ensure the effective use of evaluation resources.

Results and targets for each of these three categories are determined on an annual basis and approved by the Portfolio Board. Accordingly, the decision to initiate a portfolio evaluation should be made during the Portfolio Board meeting where the annual results are reviewed. If the Shared Results Committee concludes that there is credible evidence of system change, momentum and/or learning, an evaluation may be planned for the next implementation cycle.

¹⁰ As with other decentralized evaluations, the donor or government may request an evaluation within a certain timeframe. However, portfolios are expected to be managed in a collaborative manner by all portfolio partners, and therefore, the timing of an evaluation should be determined by all partners, carefully managed by the Portfolio Management Team.

Budget considerations

At the country office level, budgets for project-level evaluations are typically earmarked from donor funds. In contrast, outcome or thematic evaluations are generally financed through the core resources of the country office. Portfolios, which serve as a bridge between project-level and outcome/thematic evaluations, often follow a mixed funding model. Part of the budget may be covered by the country office with additional funding sourced from donors represented on the Portfolio Board. When mandatory evaluations are required by projects within a portfolio, as stipulated by donors, they can be incorporated into a broader portfolio evaluation, subject to donor agreement.

Country offices should engage donors early – during both the project design stage and the conceptualization of the broader portfolio – to highlight the value of conducting more strategic evaluations encouraged by UNDP. This allows donors to understand how their supported interventions contribute to the bigger picture and complement other initiatives within the same thematic area.

A portfolio should undergo at least one evaluation during its lifecycle and accordingly, its costs should be carefully budgeted. The timing of the evaluation should be guided by the maturity level of the portfolio, as well as the learning needs, as outlined in the previous section.

Annex: Building a portfolio from existing projects and planning its evaluation

Let's assume that a UNDP country office has prioritized tackling youth unemployment in its CPD, identifying *youth empowerment* as a key mechanism to achieve the CPD outcome of *Inclusive and Sustainable Growth*. The office already implements multiple interventions related to youth empowerment, supported by different donors, using various strategies, and managed by different teams. Given the accumulated experience and ongoing efforts, the office decides to formalize a *portfolio* around this theme. To do so effectively, the office should undertake the following steps:

1. **Defining the portfolio intent:** Clearly articulate what the office aims to achieve through youth empowerment in support of *Inclusive and Sustainable Growth* over the long term. This becomes the **portfolio intent**.
2. **Building coherence across interventions:** Review the theories of change (ToCs) of all existing and pipeline interventions to assess how each contributes to the portfolio intent. Evaluate whether these interventions collectively represent a coherent set that, in aggregate, move the country office closer to achieving its intended system-level change. Develop an updated ToC for the portfolio.
3. **Establishing governance structures:** Consolidate relationships with implementing partners and donors under a unified Portfolio Board and a Portfolio Shared Results Committee. Ensure that these stakeholders are committed not only to individual projects, but also to the overall portfolio. While they may continue funding selected interventions aligned with their priorities,

they should be open to adapting based on cross-intervention learning – whether this means shifting strategies, refining results or reallocating resources.

4. **Developing a portfolio results framework:** Create a results framework that outlines the long-term changes that the portfolio aims to achieve. These expected results can be broadly defined but are subject to change and revision, and regularly revisited during board meetings, allowing for adaptive management based on learning.
5. **Tracking Systems Change, Momentum and Learning:** As interventions progress, the portfolio should systematically document which ones are contributing to:
 - System Change (shifts in structures, norms or behaviours)
 - Portfolio Momentum (catalytic effects or scaling)
 - Portfolio Learning (insights that improve strategy or design).
6. **Adapting based on learning.** Use emerging insights to refine the portfolio. Some interventions may be amplified, modified, merged or discontinued. The Portfolio Board must always have a shared understanding and consensus on funding decisions, strategic shifts and new areas of focus based on the evolving learning landscape.
7. **Deciding on the right timing of a portfolio evaluation:** A portfolio evaluation can be initiated once the portfolio is operational. In the early stages, the evaluation may focus on the relevance and coherence of interventions, both within the portfolio and in relation to external actors. As learning accumulates, the evaluation can evolve to assess effectiveness by examining under what conditions and for whom the portfolio is making a difference. In an annex containing relevant material on the portfolio, a portfolio evaluation should include the following: (i) the Portfolio Document; (ii) the ToC; (iii) the Risk Register; (iv) the Portfolio Board's ToR; and (v) the multi-year work plan. Other supporting documents may also include: (i) annual work plans; (ii) monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) mechanisms; (iii) portfolio quality assurance documentation; (iv) social and environmental screening templates; (v) Board meeting minutes; (vi) after-action reviews; and (vii) learning logs.

