



INDEPENDENT
Evaluation Office

United Nations Development Programme

EVALUATION

OF UNDP STRATEGIC PLAN
2018–2021



EVALUATION

**OF UNDP STRATEGIC PLAN
2018–2021**

EVALUATION OF UNDP STRATEGIC PLAN 2018–2021

Copyright © IEO/UNDP March 2021

The analysis and recommendations of this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Development Programme, its Executive Board or the United Nations Member States. This is an independent publication by the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) would like to thank all those who have contributed to this review.

IEO TEAM

Directorate:

Oscar Garcia (Director) and Alan Fox (Deputy Director)

Lead evaluator:

Ana Rosa Monteiro Soares

Associate lead evaluators:

Yogesh Kumar Bhatt, Amanuel Zerihoun, Sonjuhi Singh and Richard Jones

External Peer Reviewers:

Osvaldo Feinstein, Ricardo Fuentes, Ben Ramalingam and Ngaire Woods

Evaluation consultants:

Michael Reynolds, Stephen Cutts, Christine Heyting, Alexandra Pittman, Elisabeth Olsen and Elinor Bajraktari

Publishing and outreach:

Sasha Jahic

Administrative support:

Antana Locs, Maristela Gabric, Michelle Sy and Concepcion Cole

The IEO could not have completed the evaluation without the support of the following:

STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERS

UNDP staff: UNDP staff at country, regional and headquarters offices who provided valuable insights, information and support to the evaluation.

Other stakeholders and partners: The government partners, representatives of the United Nations agencies, civil society, non-governmental organizations and bilateral and multilateral development partners who contributed to the evaluation.

FOREWORD

It is my pleasure to present the evaluation of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Strategic Plan 2018–2021. The Strategic Plan is based on a vision to achieve sustainable development by eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions; accelerating structural transformations for sustainable development; and building resilience to crises and shocks. This evaluation provides an assessment of UNDP's vision set out in the Strategic Plan, and the extent to which the enablers and changes introduced to operationalize it are helping to improve UNDP's support for fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals and helping the organization to adapt and respond to changes in context.

This is the first UNDP Strategic Plan following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. The Strategic Plan was written at an especially challenging time for UNDP given the ongoing reforms to the United Nations system. The evaluation comes at a time when UNDP is also having to significantly adapt its efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the challenging context, UNDP has made relevant contributions to development results within three broad development settings; was swift to adapt its capabilities to support UN development system reform and signature solutions stipulated in the Strategic Plan; and sustained a stable influx of resources with agile mobilization and repurposing of funds to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. UNDP has made concerted efforts to promote collaborative partnerships to support and finance the Goals; to more systemically integrate approaches for more balanced consideration of economic, social and environmental dimensions; and to mainstream the 'leave no one behind' principle. UNDP has made good progress improving its management and operations and showing determination to be a more client-oriented operational services provider with commitment to improving people management, learning and development; streamlining processes

and procedures; and expanding investments in digital and technological innovation.

There is a wealth of ideas surfacing, with great potential to transform UNDP's work. The elevation of innovation in the Strategic Plan has been followed by important investments in growing existing capabilities and mainstreaming innovation efforts across the organization. Digital initiatives are increasingly taking shape. They gained speed in support of the COVID-19 response and are helping to develop UNDP capabilities to meet growing demands in the digital development agenda. Global and country support platforms are helping to expand the expertise available at UNDP regional hubs and country offices, gradually enabling the organization to better manage and deploy its assets and capabilities to manage more context-specific and iterative and experimental approaches to problem-solving for sustainable development.

Notwithstanding such progress and successes, further efforts are needed to better define UNDP's role and value proposition in support of the 2030 Agenda and the COVID-19 pandemic response, with attention to the organization's altered position at the country level following United Nations development system reform. To meet the increasing demands driven by the change in context brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, UNDP's work on innovation should prioritize digital transformation, address administrative bottlenecks that hinder innovation, ensure improvements to knowledge management systems and develop a more deliberate approach to tracking and scaling successful innovations that can accelerate results on the Goals. To fully deliver on the Strategic Plan promise to evolve and innovate its business model, UNDP should expand its adaptive management capabilities and develop additional funding models that increase agility and flexibility. UNDP should continue to seek flatter decision-making structures and empowered teams able to better mainstream

integrated solutions and operate more efficiently in the midst of an increasingly dynamic and uncertain development landscape.

Results-based management and learning from successes and failures remain key areas for improvement. There is considerable scope for a more comprehensive and strategic approach to the establishment of global and country support platforms, to move UNDP from a project-based organization towards more portfolio and systems-based approaches. In recognition that UNDP's main asset is its workforce, the organization should timely deliver on its 'People for 2030' strategy to improve staff capabilities for systems thinking

and transformation; to reward high performance that is results focused; and to enable an innovative culture within the organization.

As UNDP develops a new Strategic Plan, I hope this evaluation will inform how the organization can further enhance its contribution to more equitable and sustainable development.



Oscar A. Garcia
Director
Independent Evaluation Office, UNDP

CONTENTS

Acronyms and abbreviations	vii
Evaluation summary	ix
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background and purpose of the evaluation	1
1.2 Objectives and scope of the evaluation	1
1.3 Evaluation approach and methodology	2
1.4 Structure of the report	4
CHAPTER 2. CONTEXT	5
2.1 The strategic development context	5
2.2 UNDP context, strategic vision, approaches, and enablers	7
CHAPTER 3. UNDP'S VISION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	13
CHAPTER 4. UNDP SUPPORT TO THE 2030 AGENDA AND THE SDGs	23
CHAPTER 5. BUSINESS MODEL INNOVATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS	39
5.1 Innovation	39
5.2 Global and country support platforms	47
5.3 Management and capabilities	53
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGEMENT RESPONSE	65
6.1 Conclusions	65
6.2 Recommendations and management response	71
FIGURES	
Figure 1. Annual expenditure by development outcomes, 2018–2020	9
Figure 2. Percentage expenditure by signature solutions, 2018–2020	9
Figure 3. UNDP integration function	14
Figure 4. Programme government perception of UNDP relevance and programme quality, 2015–2020	18
Figure 5. Programme government perception of UNDP contribution in UNDP priority areas	18
Figure 6. Programme government perception of UNDP added value	19
Figure 7. UNDP contribution to specific SDGs (programme expenditure), 2018–2020	24
Figure 8. Seven components of UNDP's support to countries for financing the SDGs	27
Figure 9. Programme government perception of how UNDP can best contribute to the SDGs	28
Figure 10. ICPE and ROAR GRES ratings by Gender Equality Seal	30

Figure 11. Percent of women in higher professional levels by region, 2019	31
Figure 12. Percent expenditure by gender marker, 2016–2020	32
Figure 13. Percent of initiatives tagged to different partners, 2019	34
Figure 14. Percent of initiatives that target different ‘leave no one behind’ groups	37
Figure 15. COVID-19 digital solutions by region and response area	46
Figure 16. Expenditure breakdown by fund category and management cost, 2018–2020	54
Figure 17. Countries with high management costs relative to average annual expenditure, 2018–2020	54
Figure 18. Programme expenditure by funding source, 2014–2020	61

TABLES

Table 1. Evaluation criteria and what is judged	3
--	---

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BMS	Bureau for Management Services
BPPS	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support
CSP	Country support platform
ERP	Enterprise resource planning
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GPN	Global Policy Network
GRES	Gender Results Effectiveness Scale
GSSU	Global Shared Services Unit
ICPE	Independent country programme evaluation
IEO	Independent Evaluation Office
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRRF	Integrated results and resources framework
LGBTQI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development
OHR	Office of Human Resources
QCPR	Quadrennial comprehensive policy review
RBA	Regional Bureau for Africa
RBAP	Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific
RBAS	Regional Bureau for Arab States
RBEC	Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States
RBM	Results-based management
ROAR	Results Oriented Analysis Report
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEIA	Socioeconomic impact assessment
SERP	Socioeconomic response plan
SP	Strategic Plan
TRAC	Target for Resource Assignment from the Core
UNCT	United Nations country team
UNDCO	United Nations Development Coordination Office
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDS	United Nations development system
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

EVALUATION SUMMARY

Towards the end of every UNDP strategic planning period, the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office evaluates what the organization intended to do, what has transpired and where there may be room for improvement. At this juncture, the evaluation looks back on an organization whose way of working across 170 countries has shifted over the past three years in response to changes to the United Nations development system. At the same time, the new administration brought a new vision for the work of UNDP, signalling a change in philosophy and changes to the design and delivery of substantive, programmatic and operational approaches. Much of what the administration planted through the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 has taken root, and UNDP has demonstrated a new dynamism, especially in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. This evaluation asserts that, based on the evidence at this early juncture, UNDP is moving in the right direction, even as it notes that for some new initiatives, it is too early to assess results, while others have room for improvement.

The evaluation sees an organization striving to support partner Governments facing severe health-related, social and economic upheaval due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It observes an organization creating sophisticated strategies and techniques to mitigate and adapt to a rapidly changing climate, as brush fires rage, floods ravage and arid fields lie fallow. It evaluates the UNDP Strategic Plan at the start of a decade of concerted action to achieve global Sustainable Development Goals, with progress buffeted not only by the pandemic but also the headwinds of nationalism, protectionism, conflict and rising inequality. The times are indeed challenging, yet ripe with opportunity, for an organization such as UNDP that has worked for over 50 years to help nations strive, cooperate and develop.

The evaluation is part of the multi-year evaluation plan of the Independent Evaluation Office. The scope of the evaluation covers the period from

January 2018 to December 2020. The evaluation takes into account the midterm review shared with the Executive Board at the annual session 2020 ([DP/2020/8](#)) but does not repeat its analysis of the performance of UNDP. Across the pages of this evaluation report, the evaluation team has sought to identify the most significant aspects of the context within which UNDP provides support, its vision of how it can best be of service and the progress it is making towards the achievement of its objectives. The evaluation also considers the extent to which the changes introduced to operationalize the Strategic Plan are helping the organization to adapt and respond to changes in context.

The evaluation provides an overarching set of conclusions on the work of UNDP under its current Strategic Plan and posits recommendations to further refine the work of UNDP, to make it more ‘fit for purpose’ in service to global sustainable development.

Context

The global development context in which UNDP drafted and is implementing its Strategic Plan includes three pivotal events steering the course of international development support. These are the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals; the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and the reforms of the United Nations system, with its work on development, management and peace and security all in flux.

The decade of action to achieve the Goals was launched in 2019 with an urgent call to all actors to dramatically increase the pace and scale of implementation efforts. What was already a herculean task with 17 Goals has become even more daunting as the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelms health systems, strains societies and devastates economies. Prior progress is now under threat, and achievement of the 2030 Agenda faces even greater challenges,

with poverty, food insecurity, deterioration of the natural environment and persistent inequalities all exacerbated by the pandemic.

For UNDP and other United Nations organizations, this is also a time of reform of the United Nations system and the delinking of the resident coordinator function from UNDP. Spearheaded by Member States through the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, and championed by the Secretary-General, the reforms seek to reposition the United Nations development system as a stronger, more cohesive, better defined and more accountable collective entity, with capacities, skill sets and resources better aligned to the 2030 Agenda and a 'new way of working'.

The vision of the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 is to help countries to achieve sustainable development by eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, accelerate structural transformations for sustainable development and build resilience to crises and shocks, framed in the form of three development settings communicated as outcomes: (a) eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions; (b) accelerate structural transformation for sustainable development; and (c) build resilience to shocks and crises. Within these development settings, six signature solutions are identified to: (a) keep people out of poverty; (b) strengthen effective, inclusive and accountable governance; (c) enhance national prevention and recovery capacities for resilient societies; (d) promote nature-based solutions for a sustainable planet; (e) close the energy gap; and (f) strengthen gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. These solutions are meant to be flexible to meet the unique challenges and demands faced in the 170 countries where UNDP operates and commits to contribute to 27 development outputs.

Two development platforms were introduced during this strategic planning period to aid delivery. A global development advisory and implementation services platform and country support platforms comprise a new set of mechanisms combining systems, services, knowledge and skills. In addition,

the Strategic Plan further articulates two streams of work, a performance stream and an innovation stream, aimed at adapting ways of working and promoting an integrated service offer.

Integration is at the heart of the Strategic Plan, understood and presented in complementary ways: (a) through integrated approaches; (b) through the integrator role; and (c) through the integration of tools and capacity-strengthening for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Strategic Plan was designed to be 'reform ready', which means retaining flexibility to support future reforms (that had not yet been finalized) and to adapt as needed to deliver on promised UNDP commitments. United Nations reform and the delinking of the resident coordination function set in motion the recruitment of 127 UNDP resident representatives, along with a realignment of staff capacities in country offices. Financing the new resident coordinator configuration entailed a doubling of the UNDP cost-sharing contribution to the United Nations system, from \$5.14 million in 2018 to \$10.3 million in 2020.

The UNDP response to COVID-19 continues to align closely to the initial strategies of the United Nations system, including the Secretary-General's call to action in the report, "Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19". The body of work in support of the UNDP COVID-19 response is considerable and expanding, including two detailed organizational strategies and regional strategies developed by the regional bureaux. The integrated response has guided country offices to work in coordination with United Nations country team counterparts to develop initial short- to medium-term socioeconomic impact assessments that consider the various impacts of COVID-19 on national economies and key sectors. The impact assessments informed subsequent national socioeconomic response plans led by the resident coordinators. UNDP issued a recovery plan in June 2020 building on the experience of the preceding three months and an understanding of growing needs. The plan, "Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030", elaborates and

focuses the UNDP COVID-19 response around four areas: (a) governance; (b) social protection; (c) green economy; and (d) digital disruption.

UNDP spent \$16.09 billion between 2018 and 2020, of which \$13.52 billion was on programming, with 75 per cent linked to the signature solutions for poverty and governance, and less than 3 per cent each was spent on the signature solutions for energy and gender.

Findings

Clarity of vision and conceptual framework. The Strategic Plan is recognized across the organization as an aspirational and flexible instrument. It set UNDP in the right direction to support countries in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, to implement the reform of the United Nations development system and to respond to the COVID-19 emergency. However, concepts underpinning integration, development settings, signature solutions, platforms, performance and innovation streams still call for more clarity to evolve and take shape.

Adaptation and contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP was swift to adapt its capabilities to support United Nations development system reform, putting in place a new generation of senior leaders in country offices and continuing to be a major contributor of financing, technical capacity and operational support services to the resident coordinator system. Delinking the coordination functions from UNDP has not been easy, and challenges remain in repositioning UNDP in the space of the humanitarian-peace and development nexus.

UNDP strength and relevance. UNDP has made relevant contributions to development results within the three broad development settings and signature solutions stipulated in the Strategic Plan. Overall, stakeholder perceptions of UNDP relevance remain favourable, especially in the areas of gender,

governance and environment, but less so in poverty reduction and energy. UNDP is most appreciated for its traditional roles providing programme and project implementation, capacity development and technical expertise, and not yet for the new offers contained in the Strategic Plan of integrated and innovative development solutions.

Key current challenges and areas for improvement.

Despite continued improvements, results-based management, monitoring and reporting, and learning from successes and failures remain key areas for improvement.

UNDP contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP has contributed to all Sustainable Development Goals, but over 50 per cent of total programme expenditure was related to Goal 1 (poverty reduction) and Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), which are also areas of key comparative strength for UNDP in alignment with the vision of the Strategic Plan. While UNDP has supported integrated approaches to achieving the Goals with a large menu of tools, inadequate corporate reporting makes it unclear which of these effectively helped to accelerate progress towards each Goal, and to what extent.

Gender equality and women's empowerment.

The Strategic Plan promoted the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment as a key accelerator of development results. UNDP now has the opportunity to more clearly articulate how gender-integration approaches can deliver more gender-transformative results¹ in all areas of development to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Key constraints continue to be the lack of adequate financial and human resources.

The principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It remains a challenge to the entire development community to systemically and effectively operationalize the key principles of the 2030 Agenda. Yet UNDP has made concerted efforts

¹ The Independent Evaluation Office Gender Results Effectiveness Scale defines gender-transformative results as results that contributed to changes in norms, cultural values, power structures and the roots of gender inequalities and discrimination.

to promote collaborative partnerships to support and finance the Sustainable Development Goals; to more systemically integrate approaches for more balanced consideration of economic, social and environmental dimensions; and to mainstream the principle of leaving no one behind. UNDP is well positioned to increase its focus, through leadership and contributions to inclusiveness and sustainability.

Innovation agenda. The elevation of innovation in the Strategic Plan has been followed by important investments in growing existing capabilities and mainstreaming innovation efforts across the organization. Important steps have been taken to set up a better enabling environment for innovation. UNDP has yet to sufficiently adapt its rules and procedures to fully leverage innovative programming, partnerships and financing opportunities.

Accelerator labs. While still at an early stage to consider results, the implementation of the accelerator lab network is generating greater exposure for social innovation techniques and digital technologies at country level, and setting the basis for more participatory, contextualized and integrated approaches to understanding development challenges and implementing solutions.

Measuring and scaling innovation. A wealth of innovations are surfacing, with great potential to transform the work of UNDP. Nevertheless, UNDP capacity to identify emergent innovations across its portfolios and support their growth and scaling is constrained by limited risk appetite, a lack of stakeholder support, inadequate financial resources, insufficient flexibility in the rules and regulations, and shortcomings in its monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management functions. The process through which demonstrated techniques and tools are integrated and scaled into service offers is ad hoc and not sufficiently institutionalized to respond to the decentralized nature of UNDP.

Digital transformation. The UNDP digital strategy has emerged as an important and timely enabler of the Strategic Plan, contributing to innovation. Digital initiatives are increasingly taking shape,

gaining speed in support of the COVID-19 response and helping UNDP to develop its capabilities to meet growing demands in the digital development agenda.

Global support platforms/Global Policy Network.

The Global Policy Network represents an improvement over previous UNDP policy support. It offers good potential for increased efficiencies in the deployment of expertise within the organization. The need remains for a more coherent approach to capacity mapping, mobility and flexible contracting modalities. Also still needed are completion of the network's infrastructure, dismantling of regional barriers and greater involvement of global policy centres, other United Nations agencies and research and academic institutions.

Country support platforms. Country support platforms are valued for their potential to spur innovation and integration at country level. These platforms have created space for multi-stakeholder engagement and experimentation. Insufficient attention has been paid to ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of platforms, as well as the measurement of their performance and results. The roll-out of country support platforms has lacked a strong business plan and conceptual framework, with limited guidance and practical support for country offices.

Management and the UNDP operational backbone.

Measures put in place during this strategic plan period have helped to reduce UNDP management costs, balance the budget, streamline processes and procedures, improve client orientation and reduce the carbon footprint of UNDP global operations. In addition, changes made possible by harnessing new technologies and rethinking capabilities for business effectiveness and efficiency have advanced the means for UNDP to improve its agility, flexibility and client satisfaction.

People management and capabilities. UNDP launched its "People 2030" strategy, offering a comprehensive people management plan to address human resource management challenges and to strengthen workforce capabilities. The

strategy has been further articulated through a “people learning and development strategy” in 2020. The organization has yet to make the tools for these strategies fully functional, and work is needed to more clearly identify risks, mitigation strategies and measures to adequately assess the development of capabilities.

Organizational culture. The nimbleness, flexibility and innovation of UNDP are impeded by a risk-averse organizational culture. The tendency towards conflict avoidance, where poor performance and behaviour are not consistently reported and addressed, hinders learning and opportunities to improve results.

UNDP funding flows and trends. Despite the challenging financial context, UNDP has sustained a stable influx of other (non-core) resources and managed to increase regular (core) resources with agile mobilization and repurposing of funds to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The financing aspect of the UNDP business model continues to adapt, and more attention is being paid to further diversification of funding sources. The changes in composition of income show how UNDP has tried to be flexible, laying the groundwork for how this could be examined more closely in the next strategic plan.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1. Strategic Plan vision and conceptual framework. The UNDP Strategic Plan is appreciated for its forward-looking integrated vision and flexibility, despite the need for more conceptual clarity and operational guidance. The Strategic Plan has contributed to improvements in development results, but the aspirational visions for integration and an innovative business model are not yet fully evident at country level. The transformation envisaged in the Strategic Plan requires more time, greater capabilities and more flexible management and financial models.

Conclusion 2. The role of UNDP in the United Nations development system and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The recent

changes brought about through the reform of the United Nations development system compel UNDP to reposition itself with a more clearly articulated and focused value-added proposition, based on its comparative strengths, to help countries achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP is especially well positioned to contribute to poverty eradication and promotion of good governance. It is also highly valued in its work in support of gender equality, environmental protection and building resilience to social, economic and environmental shocks and conflict, especially when this work is implemented in an integrated fashion with a focus on sustainable development principles.

Conclusion 3. The UNDP contribution to countries for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The strengths and positioning of UNDP in relation to integration of the Goals have become gradually more evident, yet inadequate monitoring and reporting of contributions to each individual Goal make it difficult to discern whether and to what extent the tools and support offered have been effective in achieving results and accelerating progress towards the Goals.

Conclusion 4. Gender equality as an accelerator of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Strategic Plan’s approach to further integrating gender equality and women’s empowerment has proven to be a key accelerator of development results. UNDP has gradually moved away from counting beneficiaries by sex to engaging in more gender-responsive approaches that address the different needs of men and women. Its contribution to systemic and sustainable transformation is still limited by insufficient financial and human resource allocations and attention to promote sustainable behaviour change.

Conclusion 5. Innovation and digital transformation. The Strategic Plan signalled a timely shift for UNDP innovation work, moving it from the margins to the heart of the organization. Investments in the accelerator lab network and the digital strategy illustrate efforts to renew the UNDP programmatic offer with innovation and are strengthening country offices’ capabilities to

innovate. More effective innovation management will depend on improvements to UNDP knowledge management systems, stakeholder interest, financial resources and a more deliberate approach to scaling up successes.

Conclusion 6. Platforms. The global and country support platforms established through the Strategic Plan are helping to expand the expertise available at UNDP regional hubs and country offices. This is gradually enabling the organization to better utilize and deploy its assets and capabilities to manage more context-specific and iterative and experimental approaches to problem solving for sustainable development.

Conclusion 7. Performance monitoring, reporting and learning. The UNDP performance monitoring and results reporting systems continue to improve. There have been efforts to strengthen the integrated results and resources framework of the Strategic Plan and the broader monitoring and reporting system, including the introduction of machine learning for analysis. Yet gaps remain that hinder accurate reporting for results-based management. UNDP systems for performance monitoring and results reporting are still not fit for results-based management and accurate reporting. The quality of the results framework, indicators used and data collected and reported is problematic. Limited attention is being paid beyond capturing lessons learned. UNDP has yet to ensure the use of the captured lessons to improve results, catalyse and scale up success and innovation, and accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusion 8. Management and operational backbone to the United Nations development system. UNDP has improved its management and operations, showing determination to be a more client-oriented operational service provider committed to improving people management, learning and development; streamlining processes and procedures; and expanding investments in digital and technological innovation. Despite significant progress, operational and administrative shortcomings remain, including limited agility and flexibility for adaptive management and funding.

Flatter decision-making structures will be needed to respond to fast-evolving development challenges.

Conclusion 9. Funding. UNDP has sustained relatively stable resources during challenging financial times, even as it faces increasing pressure to find innovative ways to fund its work and partner with non-traditional donors. Unless UNDP is able to move away from the projectized nature of its funding model and find more effective, predictable and flexible ways to fund integrated country programming, it will be difficult to resource the systemic transformation needed for the integrated approaches and solutions highlighted in the Strategic Plan.

Conclusion 10. COVID-19 response. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted programmes in many countries, but also presented opportunities that UNDP has capitalized on to leverage resources and capabilities in support of Member States' preparedness and response strategies. There remains space for UNDP to further leverage its thought leadership on human development approaches to help development partners be bold and think differently, beyond the COVID-19 response and the 2030 Agenda, and to build forward better, more equitably and sustainably.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The UNDP role and value proposition. In the next strategic plan, UNDP should better define its role and value proposition in support of the 2030 Agenda and the COVID-19 pandemic response, with attention to the organization's altered position at the country level following the reform of the United Nations development system; and should anchor its work on its most recognized comparative strengths, with particular focus on principles of inclusiveness and sustainability to build forward better with attention to leaving no one behind.

While actively collaborating with other United Nations agencies in support of all the Sustainable Development Goals where logical and efficient,

the organization should strive to be a development innovator, making better use of new mechanisms to promote integrated development solutions with a focus on the Goals where it has comparative strengths. Such focus does not mean that UNDP will not contribute to most, if not all, of the other Goals; given the integrated nature of the Goals, the broad contribution of UNDP is inevitable. Particular attention should be ensured to integrate the sustainability lens and the principle of leaving no one behind as catalysts for achieving the Goals. Furthermore, the focus of the next strategic plan should be on supporting the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, not only to help with recovery but to reset development pathways for a green future, with equality and resilience to build forward better.

UNDP should: (a) pay renewed attention to reducing poverty and inequalities and strengthening social protection; (b) promote the transition to a green economy, leveraging its successful work done on environment and natural resource management; and (c) strengthen inclusive democratic institutions, especially through digital transformation. This should be done in support of more resilient societies with a broader focus on shocks, the climate emergency, conflicts and future of work with foresight and complexity scenario systems thinking. In addition, UNDP should better foster the triple humanitarian-development-peace nexus to address inequalities with a rights-based, evidence-informed and human-centred approach, stressing the importance of ensuring systemic and transformative results that are socioeconomically and environmentally long lasting.

UNDP is not alone in its integration work, as this function should be a shared responsibility with United Nations country teams and other development partners. However, UNDP, with its universal presence and global network, should strategically position itself to be at the forefront of integrated solutions, serving as a catalyst, helping to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and fostering more innovative ways of working, including through ‘whole-of-government, whole-of-society and whole-of-United Nations’ approaches. In this process,

UNDP will need to better monitor and evaluate its contributions, tools and offers for the Goals, and ensure more adequate stakeholder mapping to effectively work across complex systems, understanding and recognizing the comparative strengths of different players to ‘connect the dots’ across development issues.

Actions should include networked solutions that bring diverse stakeholders and partnerships focusing on specific Goals to codesign and implement resilient systems that can adapt quickly to changes in different areas and absorb shocks, to ensure resilience and sustainability. All that will require the next strategic plan to bring greater clarity of concepts such as integrated approaches, Sustainable Development Goal integration and integrator roles. It will also be necessary to have more specific guidance for delivery mechanisms, alternative financing modalities and adapted flexible business models to help operationalize the systemic transformation envisioned for this decade of action.

Recommendation 2. Innovations. To meet the increasing demands driven by the change in context brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, UNDP work on innovation should prioritize support to partner countries on digital transformation, address administrative bottlenecks that hinder innovation, ensure improvements to knowledge management systems and develop a more deliberate approach to tracking and scaling successful innovations that can accelerate results towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

To help change the risk-averse organizational culture and ensure that innovation can be accelerated, it is particularly important that UNDP be bold in proactively addressing remaining administrative bottlenecks that limit experimentation, learning and private sector engagement. To optimize return on investments and accelerate results, UNDP should take steps to ensure dynamic alignment between its organizational policies and the evolving innovation agenda to formalize support for scaling-up of demonstrated successful solutions and practices into its mainstream ways of working. In this regard, clear, communicable norms

and evidence benchmarks to support measurement and transparent decision-making about scaling-up are required to support the participation of all business units.

Building on its comparative advantages, UNDP should focus its attention on social and digital innovation and help country offices and the national Governments that they support to navigate some of the complex emerging challenges and opportunities associated with private sector engagement, the use of new technologies and implications of new working methods. Furthermore, it will be important to prioritize the formalization of distinct support models to ensure that digital opportunities are harnessed across UNDP country offices, taking into account the various contexts in which UNDP operates.

Recommendation 3. Gender equality and women's empowerment as a Sustainable Development Goal accelerator. UNDP should further articulate how to expand and achieve the concrete benefits of integrating gender equality and women's empowerment as a catalytic development accelerator for the 2030 Agenda and the Goals. The Gender Equality Seal process should be recommended to all offices, with efforts to increase financial investment in gender across all areas. UNDP should more adequately equip the organization with staff specialized in gender who are able to implement systems that focus on gender-responsive and transformative results.

In the next strategic plan, UNDP needs to further articulate how to achieve the concrete benefits of integrating gender equality and women's empowerment as a development accelerator. This will also provide a clearer value proposition to donors on the unique value added by UNDP on gender to accelerate progress towards the Goals. With a systemic approach, all UNDP programmes should undergo a Gender Results Effectiveness Scale analysis at the design, implementation and evaluation phases to help UNDP achieve more responsive and transformative gender results.

More systemic approaches for transformation

will require UNDP to meet or even exceed its commitment to allocate 15 per cent of programme resources for initiatives that have gender equality and/or the empowerment of women as their primary and explicit objective. In this regard, the accuracy of the gender marker should be strengthened. More guidance is required for country offices to share a common understanding of how to use the marker more strategically. The marker assigned at the design stage should, if needed, be adjusted during the implementation stage. There should be stronger quality assurance processes in place at both the country office and regional levels to ensure proper use of the Gender Results Effectiveness Scale and the gender marker.

Given its proven catalytic potential, UNDP should require that all offices engage in the Gender Equality Seal process and make efforts to scale up the use of the seal not just in the private sector but also in government. This will require increased staff capacity for gender equality and women's empowerment at all levels, with adequate contractual arrangements for gender specialists. At the same time, it will be important to deepen the mainstreaming of the gender perspective across all teams instead of continuing the current overreliance on gender focal points. Further efforts towards gender parity should evolve to focus on improving working conditions for women. For instance, more attention should be given to the dimensions of unpaid care, a need illustrated strongly by the COVID-19 pandemic, while also augmenting UNDP human resources policy by aligning paternity leave for fathers and maternity/paternity leave for same-sex parents with current maternity leave provisions. These policy shifts can help support the transformation of roles within the household, which also impacts gender equality in the workplace.

Recommendation 4. Global Policy Network and country support platforms. UNDP should make more effective use of its Global Policy Network to improve mobility of expertise, with greater programming rigour through well-defined targets, milestones and effectiveness measures. In addition, a more comprehensive and strategic approach

should be promoted for the establishment of country support platforms, by advancing their conceptual framework and criteria for assessment and by providing mechanisms for practical support and guidance to promote portfolio- and systems-based approaches.

UNDP should improve the deployment of internal expertise across regions and strengthen incentives to facilitate the mobility of policy advisers from one region to another. It should make better use of the expertise residing in country offices, by creating systems and incentives, making sure that the mobility policy reaches national officers. Global policy centres should be more effectively connected to the Global Policy Network infrastructure, ensuring that the network becomes a conduit that brings policy centres closer to the regional hubs and country offices. Likewise, options should be explored for fostering closer synergies between the policy network infrastructure and the other systems for financial and human resource management. UNDP should sharpen its key Global Policy Network tools by improving guidance and the flow of information, and the creation of incentives for better use of the system.

For country support platforms to achieve desired results, UNDP should establish a comprehensive package of support for country offices that includes practical guidance, advisory and technical support, and provision for in-country coaching, if needed. This should include incentives for the involvement of regional hubs, global policy centres and other United Nations agencies with the support platforms at the country level. The platforms will need to be supported by a comprehensive system for monitoring their performance and results at the country and global levels through the annual reporting mechanism and the integrated results and resources framework.

The sustainability of existing country support platforms should be consistently assessed based on good practices, and country offices should be required to have adequate sustainability plans in place for their platforms that are vetted by the regional and global support teams. Country

support platforms should be tied more closely to the regional bureaux and be coordinated through them. Finally, an effective interface is needed for the interaction between the Global Policy Network and the country support platforms. As a foundation for this interface, it will be necessary to improve the awareness and knowledge of country offices and their partners about the platforms and the network.

Recommendation 5. Results-based management and learning. UNDP should holistically redesign its entire results and performance monitoring and reporting framework and system, with (a) indicators better aligned to the timeliness and utility of data and methods that can help more credibly measure results; (b) more ambitious milestones; and (c) greater focus and guidance for consistently capturing and promoting learning for country offices to improve results and accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Monitoring and reporting should be augmented with the country programme as the unit of analysis. The organization should monitor and report on how many country programmes have met their annual milestones and country programme results for those completing cycles, while tracking those that have not. While one system reporting on aggregate corporate-level data will still be required, attention needs to be given towards making it more useful for individual countries to learn from each other and improve results. Lessons should be shared and the information used to reprioritize support and resources to countries where efforts have fallen short of targets. Such an approach would align with the rationale of the Strategic Plan based on development settings and would constitute a more robust way to assess the performance of the organization and help countries to achieve and/or improve results.

In addition, UNDP should work with intermediate outcomes that can be more credibly linked to its interventions using more adequate indicators and targets, supported with robust monitoring, evaluation and learning systems. The indicators of the integrated results and resources framework will need to be redesigned to give the right

attention to country-level reporting, and to the efficiency and effectiveness of country offices' delivery of programmes and results. An improved results assessment and reporting system should be designed to integrate with the new enterprise resource planning system and the wide range of existing dashboards, tools and instruments, including audits, evaluations and corporate surveys.

This will require additional human resources, personnel with the right capacities on monitoring and reporting, and investments in new ways to measure progress against signature areas of work. Furthermore, UNDP can more rigorously measure and report on its concrete contributions to each of the Sustainable Development Goals it commits to. The forthcoming revision of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group handbook on results-based management and the new quadrennial comprehensive policy review present an opportunity for UNDP to engage in system-wide discussions to develop a results-based management framework that helps organizations and programme countries learn and accelerate results towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Recommendation 6. Management and operations.

To deliver fully on the promise in the Strategic Plan to evolve and innovate its business model, UNDP should fully operationalize adaptive management, additional funding models and financing capabilities to support systems transformation for countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. This should address constraints to the funding of integrated programmes, portfolios, platforms and innovation and allow the organization to move away from operating mainly with projectized funding.

It will be important for UNDP to recommit to timelines and prioritize the completion of key management and operations workstreams that were delayed even before the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that the right enabling operational systems, policies, processes and staff mindsets are in alignment to secure the timely deployment of adequate human and financial resources. This is particularly important for the clustering of operational services, given the financial and other

benefits that will accrue to UNDP and partners on completion. The proposed clustering of human resources, finance and procurement services should be completed in all regions as quickly as reasonably practicable, and the risk of further delays mitigated. The continued attention of senior management and the Office of Human Resources is essential if the completion of the clustering process is to be concluded without further delay and in a way that secures the full benefits for the organization in all regions.

In time to allow for submission along with the new strategic plan, UNDP should engage in structured discussions with the Executive Board about different approaches to the allocation of resources that better reflect the complexity, vulnerability, risk and uncertainty of different development settings. This should address constraints to the funding of integrated programmes, portfolios, platforms and innovation and allow the organization to move away from mainly operating with projectized funding. Greater attention from central and regional bureaux should be given to partnerships that would allow donors to align their funding to specific country programmes, country support platforms and accelerator labs with strategic interest in particular national needs and contexts. Furthermore, it will be important to strengthen UNDP results-based budgeting capabilities, beyond the review of the integrated results and resources framework and particularly at the country level, concretely linking resources to a more adequate level of intermediate results that can measure the value for money of UNDP contributions to results.

Recommendation 7. People management and capabilities. In recognition that the main asset of UNDP is its workforce, the organization should timely deliver on its "People for 2030" and learning and development strategies that can improve staff capabilities for systems thinking and transformation; reward high performance that is results-focused; and enable an innovative culture within the organization.

The UNDP Office of Human Resources should have direct representation at the Executive Office or at

least within the Organizational Performance Group, with the Director being a full member, ensuring that every organizational decision is informed directly by the “people perspective” and to help address the risk-averse and conflict-avoidance organizational culture. Management, working closely with the cohort of next generation leadership, human resource business partners, “people champions” and the Global Policy Network, needs to ensure the right resources and capabilities are in place. This includes improved policies and tools to support a cultural change, and talent management to better hold people accountable for their performance and behaviour. There should be clearer linkages between performance and results and between career opportunities and development.

An additional learning and development offer for programmatic and technical areas needs to be implemented to enhance the knowledge and skills of programme staff to respond to crises, such as COVID-19, to further adapt to digital needs and help countries to work with foresight, complexity and uncertainty to recover from crisis, building forward better. Thus, it is imperative that more reliable learning assessment methodologies be applied to measure how learning and development initiatives enhance capacities and impact the delivery of results, with lessons learned documented and used to inform course corrections, future investment and policy decisions.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and purpose of the evaluation

The evaluation of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Strategic Plan 2018–2021 is part of the multi-year evaluation plan of the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) approved by the UNDP Executive Board in 2018.² The evaluation was carried out within the overall provisions of the UNDP Evaluation Policy to (a) support greater UNDP accountability to global and national stakeholders and development partners and (b) contribute to learning and programme strategizing for the next strategic plan.³

The Strategic Plan Evaluation assesses the vision set out in the Strategic Plan and the extent to which the enablers and changes introduced to operationalize it are helping to improve UNDP's support for the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at global and national levels, and also helping the organization to adapt and respond to changes in context.

Three pivotal events have steered implementation of the Strategic Plan: One, it is the first UNDP Strategic Plan following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 (hereafter, the 2030 Agenda). Two, the Strategic Plan was developed and carried out in the midst of the Secretary-General's reform and repositioning of the UN development system (UNDS),⁴ which included delinking the resident coordination function from UNDP. Three, this evaluation was conducted in 2020, a year in which the coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency tested the flexibility of the

Strategic Plan and the readiness of UNDP to adapt and respond to unprecedented shocks.

The context of the 2030 Agenda, UNDS reform and COVID-19 are of key importance for UNDP's mandates and positioning in a changing global development landscape. They are, therefore, the key elements of the analytical framework for this evaluation.

1.2 Objectives and scope of the evaluation

The evaluation covers the period from January 2018 to December 2020. It encompasses the overarching vision and conceptual framework of the Strategic Plan, its contribution to improving development results and the organizational changes introduced to operationalize it. The evaluation considered the clarity of the Strategic Plan's vision and the effectiveness of its key institutional enablers to help nations deliver on the 2030 Agenda. Accordingly, the objectives of the evaluation were to assess whether the current Strategic Plan:

- a. Offers a coherent vision, purpose and sense of mission for the organization;
- b. Is recognized across the organization as a guide for action to help countries meet their development needs, especially pertaining to the SDGs, and taking into account stakeholder expectations for services from UNDP;
- c. Contributes to improved development results within the three broad development settings identified in the Strategic Plan.

² UNDP, 'Independent Evaluation Office workplan (2018–2021), DP/2018/4', 2018. <https://undocs.org/DP/2018/4>.

³ UNDP evaluation policy (<http://web.undp.org/evaluation/policy.shtml>) and UNEG norms and standards (http://www.uneval.org/papersandpubs/documentdetail.jsp?doc_id=22).

⁴ United Nations, 'General Assembly resolution on repositioning of the UN development system, adopted in May 2018 in the context of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (A/res/72/279)', 2018.

The evaluation recognizes that some UNDP initiatives and mechanisms launched during this period are at an early stage of development, and more time will be required to demonstrate change and results, especially given changes in context. The evaluation of achievements under the current Strategic Plan has been framed in acknowledgement of the limited time frame covered by the evaluation. It seeks to avoid repeating the performance assessment offered by the midterm review, presented to the Executive Board in June 2020, and instead focuses on assessing UNDP's strategy and its enablers.

The evaluation covered the UNDP response to the COVID-19 pandemic (March to December 2020) not to assess results but to address the organization's readiness to respond to the unprecedented requests for support. A separate joint evaluability assessment of the Common Chapter of the Strategic Plan, which pertains to UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and UN-Women, was presented to the Executive Board in 2020. Therefore, it is not part of this assessment.

1.3 Evaluation approach and methodology

The evaluation followed a theory-driven systems approach⁵ drawing on the theory of change in Annex 1, developed by the evaluation team, considering the Strategic Plan's theory of change but focusing on the assumptions identified by the evaluation and in alignment with the evaluation questions.⁶ The evaluation assessed the extent to which the interdependent institutional enablers

effectively integrate through a web of relationships to deliver on the vision of the Strategic Plan.⁷ Mixed methods of data collection were matched with appropriate analytical approaches. These incorporated qualitative and quantitative techniques and content analysis, both manual and with limited machine learning.⁸ Methods used included document review, country studies (building on the country programme evaluations carried out by the IEO in 2019 and 2020); meta-synthesis of 62 IEO thematic and corporate evaluations and independent country programme evaluations (ICPEs), 50 audits⁹ and 6 corporate surveys¹⁰ that were conducted between 2015 and 2020. Evaluations, audits and surveys prior to 2018 were used as baselines and not to assess performance.¹¹

In addition, the document review considered UNDP's self-reporting¹² data from the results oriented analysis reports (ROARs), reports on the integrated results and resources framework (IRRF), portfolio analysis dashboard and financial information from the Atlas enterprise resource planning system, as well as the midterm review of the Strategic Plan and other corporate-level documentation available. It also included review of information from 'web scraping' of intranet content,¹³ Yammer¹⁴ and Spark Blue.¹⁵ The desk-based country case studies, aligned to the ICPEs, included a self-assessment process through questionnaires followed by validation through documentary evidence and remote interviews.

Results and trends emerging from the desk review were validated and complemented with additional primary data collected virtually. COVID-19 travel

⁵ Theory-based evaluations are usually based on a theory of change that seeks to explain changes, considering underlying assumptions and risks.

⁶ The theory of change developed considers the Strategic Plan theory of change. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/executive-board/documents-for-sessions/adv2018-annual.html>.

⁷ What are shown as 'outputs' and 'outcomes' in the Strategic Plan theory of change are in fact actions, a deficiency in the design of the Strategic Plan, but for the evaluation the words are adjusted and considered as outputs and outcomes in the strategic plan evaluation theory of change.

⁸ The analysis and synthesis of data made use of some limited machine learning to build on the collated results from the results oriented analysis reports conducted by BPPS.

⁹ Internal audits from the Office of Audit and Investigations.

¹⁰ These included the 2015, 2017 and 2020 partnership surveys; 2016 and 2018 general staff surveys; and 2020 UN development system survey.

¹¹ Some of the programmes evaluated may have started prior to the period of the Strategic Plan to help with trend analysis, but efforts were made to reflect the situation since the start of 2018.

¹² Data from self-assessments were only used when able to be validated against further data collected and triangulated by IEO.

¹³ A technique employed to extract large amounts of data from websites.

¹⁴ An enterprise social network platform used by UNDP.

¹⁵ UNDP's digital platform for online engagement allowing its staff to collaborate across the international development landscape.

restrictions and confinement measures precluded in-country missions and face-to-face interviews, which is why all primary data were collected remotely. While these extraordinary circumstances presented some limitations, the evaluation was still able to respect evaluation norms and professional standards.

A multi-stakeholder approach was adopted to gather the views and perspectives through remote semi-structured interviews and group discussions with over 300 stakeholders. These included senior managers of UNDP's headquarters, regional bureaux, country offices, UN agencies and partners in programme countries; a selected number of thought leaders and leading experts in thematic areas; and donors and members of the Executive

Board.¹⁶ The evaluation also considered information from online consultations that took place in Spark Blue in October and November 2020 promoted by the organization to support the formulation of the 2022–2025 Strategic Plan. Experiences and opinions of different categories of stakeholders, as well as supporting narratives, were triangulated to test the assumptions, accelerators and inhibitors identified in the evaluation's theory of change and to answer the key evaluation questions, mapped against evaluation criteria (Table 1). Primary and secondary data were coded and evidence triangulated to test accuracy and consistency to ensure credible findings. (See Annex 1 for detailed methodological note.)

TABLE 1: Evaluation criteria and what is judged

Key criteria	What is judged: The extent to which...
Coherence, clarity and relevance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Strategic Plan expresses a clear vision and goals for the organization 2. There was a clear plan of action and guide to operationalize the Strategic Plan vision and goals across the organization 3. The Strategic Plan clearly articulated UNDP's integrator role and integrative approaches 4. UNDP's support for the SDGs is clear, coherent and relevant 5. UNDP contributions to UNDS reform are clear, coherent and relevant
Effectiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. UNDP has effectively operationalized Strategic Plan vision and goals 2. UNDP has effectively contributed to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda 3. UNDP has leveraged principles of leave no one behind and gender equality and women's empowerment as enablers for the 2030 Agenda to deliver results 4. UNDP has leveraged comparative advantages and collaborative partnerships to deliver results 5. The Strategic Plan promoted and scaled innovation 6. Global and country support platforms served as effective delivery mechanisms
Efficiency and adaptability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Strategic Plan enabled a nimbler, more agile and innovative organization that can adapt capabilities to deliver and accelerate progress towards the SDGs 2. UNDP has been able to adapt its management practices in line with the Strategic Plan 3. Changes to the internal environment (reforms, structures, systems, incentives and business models) have made UNDP more fit for purpose 4. UNDP has been able to respond and adapt to the COVID-19 crisis 5. The people and finances of the organization are being efficiently managed.

¹⁶ Artificial intelligence may also be applied to interview data and triangulated against trends of available surveys.

Special attention was paid to using a gender-responsive approach to data collection and analysis. Gender marker data were used for analysis of gender programme expenditures against commitments made, and sex-disaggregated data were assessed where available. The IEO's gender results effectiveness scale (GRES) was used to assess the quality and level of gender-related approaches and results.

1.4 Structure of the report

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 sets out the global development context, highlighting shocks and trends. It summarizes the UNDP context, explaining the Strategic Plan strategic setting, vision, approaches and enablers. The following chapters present the key evaluation findings organized according to the evaluation questions and assumptions mapped in the evaluation's theory of change. Chapter 3 assesses coherence and relevance of the Strategic Plan vision and conceptual framework as well as UNDP's strengths, relevance and recurrent challenges. It examines whether the Strategic Plan offers a clear, coherent

vision, purpose and sense of mission that guide the organization to better support Member States to achieve development results within the broad development setting established in the Strategic Plan. It also assesses the extent to which UNDP's adaptation to UNDS repositioning and changes in context have affected results.

Chapter 4 looks at UNDP's contribution to the SDGs and how it reports on that contribution. It examines UNDP's integrated support to accelerating progress towards achievement of the SDGs through the SDG integration tools and offers. This chapter also looks at gender equality and women's empowerment as a key accelerator of development. Finally, it examines UNDP's approach in working with some of the core dimensions of the 2030 Agenda and how UNDP is addressing them. Chapter 5 assesses how effectively and efficiently UNDP has evolved and innovated its business model and is managing its assets, capabilities and finances to make the organization more nimble, innovative and effective to contribute to improved development results. Chapter 6 sets out the conclusions and recommendations.

CONTEXT

2.1 The strategic development context

The global development context in which UNDP prepared and is implementing its Strategic Plan includes two pivotal events steering the course of international development support: the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, and the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Strategic Plan is first and foremost framed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, approved in 2015. A decade of action to deliver the SDGs was launched in 2019, recognizing the world was not on track to deliver on the Goals by 2030, and urging all actors to dramatically increase the pace and scale of implementation efforts. In this effort, the Agenda has renewed the call to leave no one behind, recognizing that the benefits of globalization have to date enriched a relatively small part of the population and have certainly not reached the most marginalized and vulnerable.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major shock that has changed the context of Strategic Plan implementation. It has had a massive impact globally on health, societies and economies, hampering the sustainability of the development work of governments, the UN and UNDP. Prior SDG progress is now under threat, and achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs faces even greater challenges as the pandemic has exacerbated poverty, food insecurity, deterioration of the natural environment, and persistent inequalities.¹⁷

Global poverty is increasing for the first time since

1998; an estimated 71 million to 100 million people are estimated to have been pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020 alone. Unless effective action is taken, progress in poverty reduction across 70 developing countries could be set back between 3 and 10 years.¹⁸ A recent UNDP study highlights the uncertainty around projections but points to an increase in poverty of 251 million by 2030 under a 'high damage' scenario, with a protracted recovery.¹⁹ Disruptions to health and vaccination services and limited access to food and nutrition services are causing hundreds of thousands of additional under-five deaths and tens of thousands of additional maternal deaths.²⁰

Poverty increases have disproportionately impacted women and exacerbated gender inequalities: Poverty is expected to affect 47 million more women and girls than men by 2021,²¹ and poverty rates for women are expected to increase by 9.1 percent due to the pandemic, reversing the progress of recent years. The pandemic has also increased the burden of care and unpaid labour for women,²² who are disproportionately represented in financially precarious employment, including the domestic and informal sectors and daily wage jobs. Women are also more likely to be working in the care and health sectors at the front lines of addressing the pandemic, and thus are at higher risk of infection.

Other gender inequalities persist across most countries, with women and girls facing barriers

¹⁷ UNSDG, 'The Sustainable Development Goals Report', 2020.

¹⁸ UNDP, 'The 2020 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index', 2020. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-MPI>.

¹⁹ Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Studies and UNDP, 'Impact of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals: Pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a World Reshaped by COVID-19', 2020.

²⁰ Hallegatte, Stephane and Brian Walsh, 'COVID, climate change and poverty: Avoiding the worst impacts', World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/climatechange/covid-climate-change-and-poverty-avoiding-worst-impacts>.

²¹ UN-Women, 'From Insights to Action. Gender Equality in the Wake of Covid-19', 2020.

²² United Nations, 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women', 2020.

limiting their full and equal participation in the labour market and leadership positions. Women account for only 11 percent of the world's leaders, and only 4 of 193 countries have at least 50 percent women in their national legislatures.²³ Only 47 percent of women were active in the labour market compared to 74 percent of men in 2019.²⁴ The wage gap between men and women averages 19 percent.²⁵ Furthermore, sexual and gender-based violence continues to be a major issue, affecting 31 percent of women in their lifetime.

The pandemic is also affecting democratic governance. There has been some advancement with digital governance and technology access in response to the pandemic, but many challenges have limited citizens' access to services, posing risks to realization of human rights everywhere. The pandemic shined light on a new form of social inequality: Unequal access to information and communication technologies reinforces and widens the digital divide. In many countries the pandemic has also restricted movement and assembly and curtailed civil liberties. There are worries that these limitations may be used for political purposes, leading to continued human rights abuses and curtailing of rights after the pandemic is over.²⁶

The crisis has also exacerbated the rising trends of populism, authoritarianism and ethno-nationalism in some countries. It has augmented xenophobia and hate crimes, violence and mistreatment of vulnerable persons. It has served as a pretext for repressive measures and the further erosion of democracy. If not properly mitigated, social and

economic hardship caused by the pandemic can exacerbate tensions and civil unrest and lead to harsh security responses.²⁷ This could further undermine the quality of democracy and civil liberties and increase vulnerabilities and inequalities around the world.

Growing urbanization is another concern. It will be most rapid in countries that are currently the most rural in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia and several countries in South-East Asia. There is increasing discussion on the implications of slower population growth, resulting in a shift from predominantly younger populations to older ones.²⁸ At the same time, labour force participation by young people has continued to decline, from 568 million to 497 million between 1999 and 2019, despite an increase in the global youth population from 1 billion to 1.3 billion.^{29,30} Migration has increased, driven by urbanization, climate change, economic developments and conflict. Currently, international migrants comprise 3.6 per cent of the global population, compared to 2.8 per cent in 2000.³¹ The number of refugees and internally displaced people has reached the highest recorded levels.³² Conflicts and political instability have also contributed to the upsurge in refugees, and in host countries it is straining already scarce resources and heightening the risk for tension.

Conflict is a major obstacle to achieving the SDGs, with 1.8 billion people living in 34 fragile contexts, a number projected to grow to 2.3 billion by 2030.³³ The average level of global peacefulness has deteriorated by 2.5 percent since 2008, driven largely by in-state conflicts and terrorism.³⁴ Furthermore, in

²³ Council on Foreign Relations, 'Women's Power Index'. <https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index>.

²⁴ 'World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2020', ILO, Geneva. <https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2020/lang-en/index.htm>.

²⁵ ILO, 'Global Wage Report 2018/19: What Lies Behind Gender Pay Gaps, 2019. https://www.ilo.org/tokyo/WCMS_650553/lang-en/index.htm.

²⁶ United Nations, 'Covid-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together', 2020. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ United Nations, 'Report of the UN Economist Network for the UN 75th Anniversary: Shaping the Trends of Our Time', September 2020.

²⁹ ILO, 'Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020', 2020.

³⁰ World Economic Forum, '19 Of the World's 20 Youngest Countries Are in Africa', 2019.

³¹ UN DESA, 'International Migration 2020', January 2021.

³² World Bank, 'Pathways to Peace', 2018.

³³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 'States of Fragility', OECD Publishing, 2018, Paris.

³⁴ Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Global Peace Index 2020', 2020. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GPI_2020_web.pdf.

recent years, democratic governance has been seen to decline, with falling public trust in government institutions; dissatisfaction with government performance; restrictions on civil liberties and freedoms; increasing influence of populist groups; disregard for human rights, norms and agreements; and overall disengagement between the electorate and ruling elites. The global deterioration in civil liberties and political rights has been accompanied by a decline in global press freedom, which fell to its lowest point in at least a decade in 2019.³⁵

Vulnerable groups, especially in conflict-affected countries, have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and the global community's ability to respond to conflict and support affected populations has been severely constrained. Conflict-affected populations, refugees and displaced people are especially vulnerable to contagion, living in refugee camps that are often densely populated, with little opportunity for social distancing, limited access to hygiene and poor access to already strained health systems.

Environmental and climate shocks continue to highlight the need for more sustainable measures to curb vulnerability and improve resilience. Unsustainable consumption of natural resources and associated loss of habitat and biodiversity remain significant. The vicious cycle of degrading environment, depleting natural resources and climate shocks has kept millions of people in a state of poverty and vulnerability, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. Severe inequalities between low- and high-income countries persist, with the lowest-income countries bearing the greatest relative costs of disasters.³⁶ Long-term low-carbon development strategies are pivotal to reducing carbon emissions, but governments often fail to take advantage of technological advances to achieve energy efficiency or zero-carbon development.³⁷

The crises in donor countries caused by the pandemic — from the immediate health crisis to deep socioeconomic crises — are likely to result in donor cuts as international development budgets are redirected to domestic spending. This could lead to a decline in global official development assistance. Of the \$11 trillion global fiscal response to the pandemic, 88 percent has been disbursed by high-income countries. As the immediate health crisis transitions to a deep socioeconomic crisis, international development assistance is highly vulnerable to reallocation for domestic needs.

2.2 UNDP context, strategic vision, approaches and enablers

The Strategic Plan was written at an especially challenging time for UNDP, given the ongoing reforms to the UN system, with the UN's approaches on development, management and peace and security all in flux. Spearheaded by Member States through the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR) process and championed by the Secretary-General, the reforms seek to reposition the UNDS as a stronger, more cohesive, better-defined and more accountable collective entity, with capacities, skillsets and resources better aligned to the 2030 Agenda and a 'new way of working'.³⁸ The QCPR described how UN agencies should support countries in achieving the 2030 Agenda and related agreements and provided a set of guiding principle and mandates.³⁹

When the Strategic Plan was designed, there was much uncertainty about the outcomes of UN reform. Therefore, it was designed to be 'reform ready', to retain flexibility to support reform efforts and adapt as needed to deliver on UNDP commitments.⁴⁰ The reform has brought a new generation of UN country teams, built around the strategic UN Sustainable

³⁵ Freedom House, 'Media Restrictions Today Will Harm Democracy Tomorrow, Perspectives', 2020.

³⁶ UNDRR, 'Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction', 2019.

³⁷ World Economic Forum, 'Global Risks Report 2017', 12th ed., Geneva, 2017.

³⁸ The new way of working calls on humanitarian and development actors to work collaboratively together, based on their comparative advantages, towards 'collective outcomes' that reduce need, risk and vulnerability over multiple years. <https://www.un.org/jsc/content/new-way-working>.

³⁹ United Nations, 'Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System: Recommendations. Report of the Secretary-General', September 2016.

⁴⁰ UNDP, 'Strategic Plan 2018–2021', 2017, p. 7.

Development Cooperation Framework⁴¹ and led by an independent resident coordinator delinked from the UNDP resident representative. The delinking of the resident representative/resident coordinator roles and the development of support structures for the resident coordinator offices was a considerable focus during the early years of the Strategic Plan. The reform and delinking required a repositioning⁴² effort from UNDP, including the recruitment of a new generation of 127 UNDP resident representatives, along with a realignment of staff capacities in country offices.⁴³ Financing of the new resident coordinator configuration doubled the UNDP cost-sharing contribution to the UN system, from \$5.14 million in 2018 to \$10.3 million in 2020.

A funding compact was agreed to by the General Assembly and the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2019, in support of the UNDS reforms.⁴⁴ The compact is a set of ambitious commitments by Member States and the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) to ensure more predictable and flexible funding for UN development activities. It also provides incentives for Member States to contribute funds more flexibly and predictably, and for UN development entities to increase their coherence, cooperation, transparency and efficiency.

The overarching vision of the Strategic Plan 2018–2021 at the impact level, to “help countries to achieve sustainable development by eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions and accelerate structural transformations for sustainable development and building resilience to crises and shocks,”⁴⁵ is framed as a response to three development settings, communicated as outcomes:⁴⁶

1. Eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions.

2. Accelerate structural transformations for sustainable development.
3. Build resilience to shocks and crises.

Six signature solutions were outlined in the Strategic Plan around UNDP’s core competencies and mandate. The solutions were meant to be flexible to meet the unique challenges and advance country priorities in different development settings:

1. Keep people out of poverty.
2. Strengthen effective, inclusive and accountable governance.
3. Enhance national prevention and recovery capacities for resilient societies.
4. Promote nature-based solutions for a sustainable planet.
5. Close the energy gap.
6. Strengthen gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

The signature solutions aim to use UNDP’s integrated approach to assist countries to accelerate progress on nationally defined priorities and achievement of the SDGs. In alignment, there are 27 Strategic Plan outputs and institutional results. Leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first are indicated as principles to permeate all key areas of UNDP collaboration.

Between 2018 and 2020, UNDP spent \$16.09 billion, with \$13.53 billion on programming (Figures 1 and 2); analysis of these data is presented in the following chapter.

⁴¹ UNSDG, ‘United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. Internal Guidance’, 2019.

⁴² On 31 May 2018, Member States adopted Resolution [72/279](#).

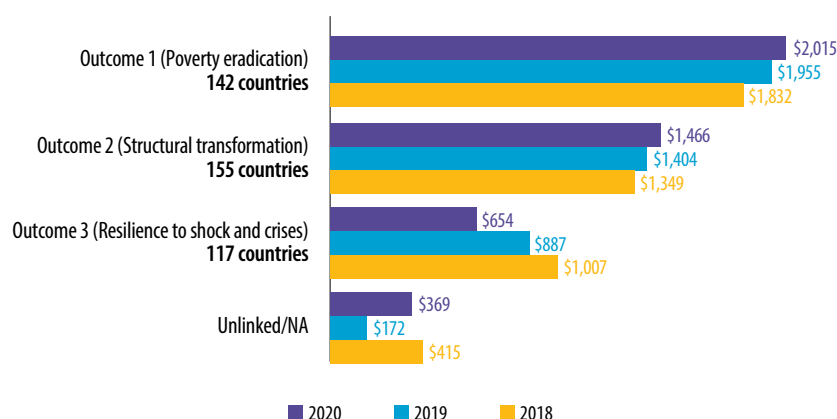
⁴³ UNDP, ‘Progress Update on the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 72/279 on Repositioning of the UN Development System. Information Note for the Executive Board Second Regular Session 2020’, 2020.

⁴⁴ United Nations, ‘Implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, 2019: funding compact (A/74/73/Add.1–E/2019/14/Add.1)’, 2019.

⁴⁵ UNDP, ‘UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018–2021’ (DP/2017/38), 2017.

⁴⁶ The development settings are described as outcomes in the Strategic Plan theory of change, even though they are expressed as actions.

FIGURE 1. Annual expenditure by development outcomes, 2018–2020 (US\$ Millions)

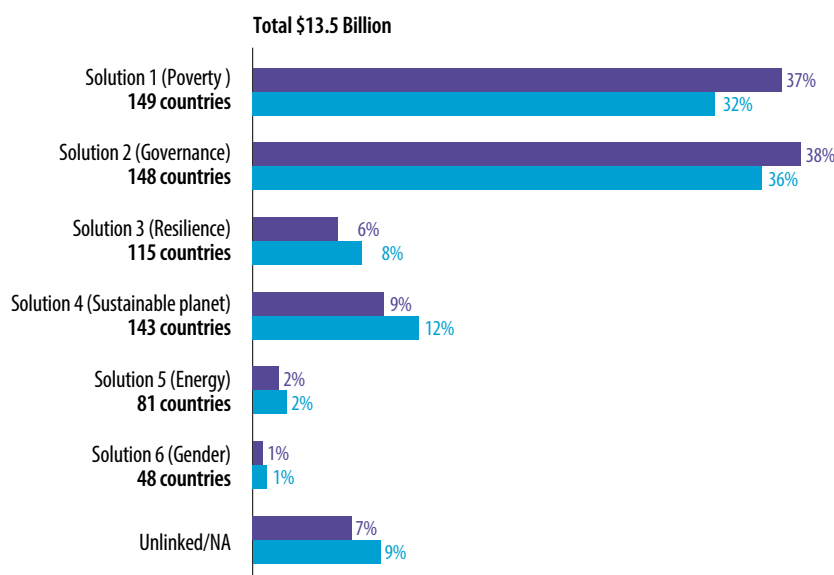


Source: Final 2018–2019 programme financial data from BPPS, 2020 programme data from Atlas

About 75 percent of programme expenditure in the 2018–2020 period was linked to the poverty and governance signature solutions.⁴⁷ Less than 3 percent of the expenditure was linked to the energy and gender signature solutions. Large UNDP projects tended to have a disproportionately large impact on

expenditure across signature solutions, as the top five projects in terms of expenditure accounted for 21 per cent of UNDP's programme expenditure. At the same time, even after excluding these projects, the poverty and governance signature solutions accounted for 68 per cent of the total expenditure.⁴⁸

FIGURE 2. Percentage expenditure by signature solutions, 2018–2020



Source: Final 2018–2019 programme financial data from BPPS, 2020 programme data from Atlas

⁴⁷ It should be noted that the low expenditure on the resilience signature solution is because many of the resilience projects were tagged to the poverty signature solution.

⁴⁸ Projects excluded are: Commitment Towards Fast Tracking 90-90-90 Targets (Zimbabwe), Funding Facility for Stabilization (Iraq), LOTFA - Support to Payroll Management (Afghanistan), Procurement Support Services to Ministry of Health (Ukraine) and Yemen Crisis Response Project II (Yemen).

Two development platforms were introduced to deliver in this context: the global development advisory and implementation services platform, also called the Global Policy Network (GPN), and the country support platforms (CSPs). These comprise a new set of delivery mechanisms to combine systems, services, knowledge and skills. The aim is to change how UNDP organizes and deploys its assets and capabilities to achieve greater integration, efficiency and development effectiveness.

Two streams of work, the performance stream and the innovation stream, were meant to interconnect to evolve and innovate future business models.⁴⁹ These were aimed at adapting ways of working and building capacities to provide an integrated service offer.

The IRRF is aimed at translating the Strategic Plan into a set of development and organizational results that track the use of resources and measure performance. Results are presented at the levels of impact, outcome (development settings) and output (signature solutions adapted to the development outcomes).

Integration is at the heart of the Strategic Plan. It is understood and presented in complementary ways throughout UNDP's work, in terms of UNDP's role, development approaches and SDG integration tools and support. The UNDP integrator role was formally recognized by the General Assembly in the resolution it adopted on the repositioning of the UNDS in 2018, at the same time as the UN resident coordinator role became independent of UNDP.⁵⁰ While requesting the Secretary-General to ensure a smooth transition to the new system, the resolution requests that "due consideration" be given to UNDP as the "support platform of the United Nations development system providing

an integrator function in support of countries in their efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda". This role for UNDP is also briefly set out in the management and accountability framework for the UN development and resident coordinator systems:⁵¹ "UNCT members support the role of the resident coordinator in strategically positioning the UN development system in the country and delivering coherent and coordinated support to national counterparts, including UNDP in providing its integrator function."

UNDP, and the UN as a whole, developed and adapted strategies to respond to COVID-19. UNDP's response continues to be closely aligned to the UN's initial strategies, including the Secretary-General's call to action in the report on UN shared responsibility in responding to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19.⁵² At the Secretary-General's request, UNDP has taken the technical lead role for the socioeconomic response while the World Health Organization (WHO) leads the health response and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs leads the humanitarian response. UNDP's technical lead role is underpinned by its two critical functions at country level – as an integrator across policy, programmatic and organizational silos, and as an operational backbone for the UN and partners.

The body of work in support of UNDP's COVID-19 response is now considerable and includes two detailed organizational strategies⁵³ as well as regional bureau-level strategies. The strategies and UNDP's response have been financed through additional donor contributions: the COVID-19 Rapid Response Facility, capitalized at \$30 million, and the COVID-19 Rapid Financing Facility, capitalized at \$100 million. The integrated response has guided country offices to work across the United Nations

⁴⁹ UNDP defines its business model as the combination of systems, processes, instruments, partnerships and financing that effectively and efficiently support the delivery of programmes and projects.

⁵⁰ United Nations, 'Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on the repositioning of the United Nations development system', May 2018.

⁵¹ UNSDG, 'Management and Accountability Framework of the UN Development and Resident Coordinator System', 2019.

⁵² United Nations, 'Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19', March 2020.

⁵³ UNDP, 'Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030', June 2020 and UNDP, 'COVID-19 – UNDP's Integrated Response', April 2020.

country team (UNCT) to develop initial short- to medium-term socioeconomic impact assessments (SEIAs) to support countries⁵⁴ in understanding the various impacts of COVID-19 across their economies and key sectors. The SEIAs informed subsequent national socioeconomic response plans (SERPs) led by the UN resident coordinator.

UNDP issued a nuanced recovery plan in June 2020, building on the experience of the preceding three months and an understanding of growing needs. The UNDP 'Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030'⁵⁵ further elaborates and focuses UNDP's COVID-19 response around four areas: governance, social protection, green economy and digital disruption.

⁵⁴ UNDP, 'COVID-19: Socio-economic impact', 2020. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/covid-19-pandemic-response/socio-economic-impact-of-covid-19.html>.

⁵⁵ UNDP, 'Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030', June 2020.

UNDP'S VISION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter assesses the coherence and relevance of the Strategic Plan vision and conceptual framework as well as UNDP's strengths, relevance and recurrent challenges. It examines whether the Strategic Plan offers a clear, coherent vision, purpose and sense of mission that guide the organization to better support Member States achieve improved development results within the broad development settings established in the Strategic Plan. It also assesses the extent to which UNDP's adaptation to UNDS repositioning and changes in context have affected results.

Finding 1. Clarity of vision and conceptual framework — The Strategic Plan is recognized across the organization as an aspirational and flexible instrument that sets UNDP in the right direction to support achievement of the SDGs, implementation of UNDS reform and response to the COVID-19 emergency. However, concepts underpinning integration, development settings, signature solutions, platforms, performance and innovation streams still call for more clarity.

The Strategic Plan is appreciated as a flexible “license to operate,”⁵⁶ leading UNDP in the right direction despite some lack of clarity. Triangulated consultation and desk review of documents highlight that some aspects of the Strategic Plan remain insufficiently articulated, impeding their absorption by country offices and partners. There have been attempts to provide more details in follow-up action plans, strategies and communications, but the lack of clarity persists for many. It has been explained by some as a potential

consequence of the uncertain context in which the plan was drafted: just before UNDS reform and appointment of a new UNDP Administrator. On the other hand, this lack of clarity may have provided crucial flexibility for an organization facing radical uncertainty.⁵⁷ Whereas clarity of vision is important, flexibility in decentralized implementation is crucial to avoid wasting resources and to achieve results.

The three development settings were planned to underpin different approaches to programming according to different country contexts, priorities and needs in alignment with the signature solutions.⁵⁸ Development settings do not exactly equate with country typologies (such as least developed countries, middle-income countries, crisis countries, etc.) and all three development settings may be present in one country. Meta-synthesis of IEO country level and thematic evaluations indicate UNDP has contributed to development results within the three broad development settings. UNDP has demonstrated the ability to work in different country contexts and typologies ranging from net contributor countries, middle-income countries, least developed countries and conflicts/crises. It is particularly able to swiftly reconfigure its work delivery to meet new challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, despite heterogeneity among countries, country programmes often exhibit similar features. Additional semi-structured interviews for this evaluation indicate differentiated approaches by development setting are not clear and are not always evident on the ground.

⁵⁶ Phrase used in multiple speeches of senior management.

⁵⁷ Feinstein, Osvaldo, ‘Development and Radical Uncertainty’, *Development in Practice*, Routledge, 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341624875_Development_and_radical_uncertainty.

⁵⁸ UNDP, ‘UNDP Strategic Plan 2018–2021’, 2017, para 33.

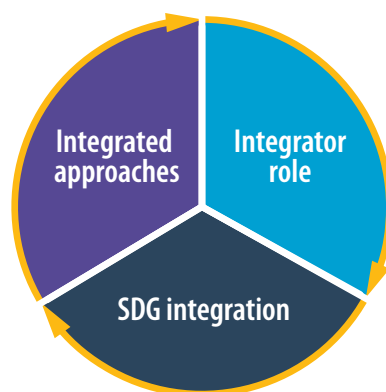
Triangulated consultations indicate the terminology of signature solutions was particularly confusing and is still perceived as misleading, despite subsequent guidance and the establishment of communities of practice for each of the solutions to foster exchange and learning. Desk review indicates the signature solutions are neither ‘signature’, as they are not all areas where UNDP would be thought of as the lead UN agency, nor ‘solutions’, as they do not comprise prescribed tools or ‘blueprints’ but rather approaches to be tailored according to country needs/priorities and financing modalities. The nomenclature was unfamiliar and was confused with the more familiar results-based planning terminology of outcomes and outputs.

The integration concept promoted in the Strategic Plan remains confusing to most stakeholders. The evaluation found that UNDP has promoted the

following complementary and related approaches to integration (Figure 3):

- a. Integrated approaches: Good programming practice aimed at leveraging UNDP’s positioning to work with and across whole-of-government and whole-of-society;
- b. The integrator role: Developing possible solutions with a multidimensional and holistic lens to address underlying and root causes the Strategic Plan identified as “wicked and stubborn” development issues;
- c. SDG integration: Supporting SDG integration tools, capacity-strengthening efforts and other offers, based on integrated development approaches and capacity development to accelerate achievement of the SDGs.

FIGURE 3. UNDP integration function



Source: IEO interpretation of the integration function

The SDG integration team has undertaken significant efforts in 2020 to articulate its offer, the results of which may lag. For example, the revamped version of the SDG integration website reached over 100,000 users in 2020, and the dedicated Twitter @SDGintegration generated 48,000 profile visits and over 10,000

engagements. Integrated approaches and tools were also supported in 39 countries and regions. The global team did this ambitious work with very limited resources.⁵⁹ Despite efforts, most stakeholders consulted were unclear about the differences and complementarities and how to work with

⁵⁹ Between 2018 and 2020, BPPS spent about \$23 million on outputs related to capacity development across government to integrate the 2030 Agenda and expand public and private financing for the achievement of the SDGs.

these integration concepts and approaches. Some stakeholders even questioned whether UNDP should really pursue the integrator role after the delinking of the resident coordinator function. Others indicated the integrator role was thrust upon UNDP. Such comments further confirm the lack of comprehensive understanding and the potential of the different and complementary approaches to integration promoted by UNDP.

There is indication that UNDP is better at communicating an intention to play a catalytic role to support SDG mainstreaming, acceleration and innovation. These are clearer and more visible in UNDP's work, even if at times it is challenging to measure the attribution of a 'catalyst'.

Despite several examples of the use of platforms and efforts to improve the performance and innovation streams discussed in chapter 5, consultations also highlighted limited guidance and support on the newly introduced global and country support platforms, as well as how the performance and innovation streams interconnect concretely to support country-level operations. These issues are discussed in detail in subsequent findings.

Finding 2. Adaptation and contribution to UNDS repositioning — UNDP was swift to adapt its capabilities to support UNDS reform. It put in place a new generation of senior country office leaders and continued to be a major contributor of financing, technical capacity and operational support services to the resident coordinator system. Delinking the coordination functions from UNDP has not been easy, and challenges remain in repositioning UNDP in the humanitarian-peace-development nexus.

Delinking the coordination function put significant pressure on UNDP to restructure its capabilities, reposition the organization with an integrator role

and redefine its value proposition. UNDP efficiently managed the challenging task of recruiting a new leadership cadre of 127 resident representatives within a year of the reform while still continuing to provide operational services across all resident coordinator offices and for nearly all UNCTs.⁶⁰ UNDP has also continued to support the resident coordinator system, meeting its financial obligations based on the UNSDG cost-sharing formula, under which UNDP's costs are higher than any other UN entity except the Secretariat.⁶¹

UNDP has also faced challenges in articulating its integrator role with governments and within UNCTs. It has met resistance from some resident coordinators and UN agencies that struggle to distinguish, for example, the overall coordination role of the United Nations Development Coordination Office (UNDCO)/resident coordinators and the technical integration role of UNDP. In many programme countries, UNDP's 'integrator' role has proved particularly contentious and confusing.

Even though UNDP's integrator function was mentioned by the UN Secretary-General in his 2018 report to the General Assembly on the repositioning of the UNDS,⁶² it has not been clearly understood. Especially unclear is how it should complement, rather than duplicate or conflict with, the coordination role of the newly independent resident coordinators. The term 'integrator' is also increasingly being used by the new resident coordinator system as something resident coordinators lead, or that is a UNCT-wide function. The 2020 Report of the Chair of the UN Sustainable Development Group on the Development Coordination Office, for example, makes several references to "integration", all related to the role of the resident coordinator or UNCT as a whole, and none mentioning UNDP.⁶³ Moreover,

⁶⁰ As recognized in decision 2020/4 taken at the 2020 Annual Session of the Executive Board.

⁶¹ UNDP's current share is 13.3 percent and if recommendations of the Independent Review of the UNSDG Cost-Sharing Agreement in Support of the UN Resident Coordinator System are accepted, this could rise to over 14 percent.

⁶² United Nations, 'Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity and peace on a healthy planet (A/72/684-E/2018/7)', 2018, paras 70 and 71.

⁶³ UN Development Coordination Office, 'Report of the UNSDG Chair on the Development Coordination Office', 2019.

UNDCO ascribes the role of “integrator” to itself in references on its website.⁶⁴ A recent survey of the resident representatives⁶⁵ revealed that only 25 percent of the resident coordinators promoted UNDP’s integrator function.

According to stakeholders consulted for this evaluation, there are multiple sources of tension, especially around communications and relations with governments. Challenges seem to be amplified where the resident coordinator has not changed, and they interpret their development role as broadly similar to what it was before the reform. UNDP reported to its Executive Board that only around half of resident representatives believe the new resident coordinator role has had a positive effect in promoting UNCT collaboration (53 percent) and facilitating inter-agency work (48 percent).⁶⁶

Despite challenges, UNDP management in headquarters indicated that the resident coordinator delinking has yielded benefits for UNDP, such as enabling the organization to focus more on its core programmatic strengths. However, according to ICPEs and further consultations for this evaluation, this positive view is not always evident at country level. UNDP is contending with diminished status, less timely access to higher officials and lack of visibility.

As a development agency of the United Nations with extensive experience and geographic reach, UNDP has a longer term development perspective at the country level that strategically cuts across the peace, security and humanitarian interventions. This puts UNDP in a unique position to strengthen multidimensional and integrated responses for the humanitarian-development-peace-nexus. UNDP was a co-lead in pushing for the nexus approach and ensured that it was mainstreamed in the humanitarian agenda (the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit), the peacebuilding review (Peacebuilding Support Office and Secretary-General’s report),

in disaster risk reduction (the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030), and in the development agenda (2030 Agenda, United Nations/World Bank partnership). In addition, UNDP is playing a leading role in coordinating the nexus approach through its global co-chairing roles (e.g. Joint Steering Committee to Advance Humanitarian and Development Collaboration, Inter-Agency Standing Committee Results Group 4, UNSDG TT4, OECD INCAF) and supporting the nexus approach at the country level (e.g. through UNDP support to Joint Steering Committee priority countries).

UNDP has three roles around the humanitarian-development-peace nexus: (a) acting as a bridge between humanitarian, development and peace actors in fragile/crisis situations, (b) working towards ‘ending need’ by scaling up development and peace programming so that humanitarian responses are no longer required, and (c) helping develop financing strategies (bringing together international, national, public and private finance) for nexus approaches.

UNDP has used the opportunity of UN reform to support bridging the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, both globally and on the ground. However, there are areas that need additional attention. The operationalization of the nexus approach in crisis/fragile contexts is still a work in progress, with all stakeholders still needing to adapt further. There is a need to clearly articulate the positive impact of working together on the ground and develop arrangements to show results in a systematic way.

Changes in internal structures also helped UNDP. In 2018 it reverted to its earlier structure of a separate Crisis Bureau, which consolidated conflict-related support and streamlined technical support to country offices. The IEO evaluation of conflict-affected countries concluded that UNDP has made important contributions to stabilizing, building

⁶⁴ For example, in the context of explaining the purpose of the Joint SDG Fund that it administers: <https://jointsdgfund.org>.

⁶⁵ Joint UNDP and UN Development Coordination Office survey of UNDP country offices on the reform process, March–April 2020; 87 of the 128 resident representatives responded.

⁶⁶ United Nations, ‘Progress Update on the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 72/279 on Repositioning of the UN Development System, Information Note for the Executive Board, Second Regular Session 2020’, 2020.

and strengthening institutions, as well as enabling processes for state-building and peacebuilding. The UNDP contribution to global debates and formulation of inter-governmental agreements to further the humanitarian-development-peace nexus in refugee response has been significant. UNDP is well regarded for its multi-stakeholder engagement in a range of development and crisis areas.

The operationalization of the triple nexus approach was also influenced by the delinking. In security-mandated countries there were immediate implications for UNDP in terms of access to technical expertise and the use of mission infrastructure for programme implementation in remote and conflict-affected areas.

In its response to COVID-19, UNDP, like many other agencies, played a dual role: it was a technical lead benefiting the whole UN system while also putting forward its own COVID offer. As technical lead for the socioeconomic response, UNDP has worked with the UNDCO in the Secretariat to support resident coordinators and UNCTs to develop 144 SEIAs and 119 SERPs for countries.⁶⁷ These have varied in their scope, quality and utility to governments. COVID-19 has offered resident coordinators an immediate opportunity to push forward the UNDS reform and repositioning agenda, but the work on the response also highlighted the need for and value of UNDP's continued technical support to address broader socioeconomic issues.

Finding 3. UNDP strengths and relevance — UNDP has made relevant contributions to development results within the three broad development settings and signature solutions stipulated in the Strategic Plan. Overall, stakeholder perceptions of

UNDP relevance remain favourable, especially in the areas of gender, governance and environment, but less so in poverty reduction and energy. UNDP is most appreciated for its traditional roles providing programme and project implementation, capacity development and technical expertise, and not yet for the new offers contained in the Strategic Plan of integrated and innovative development solutions.

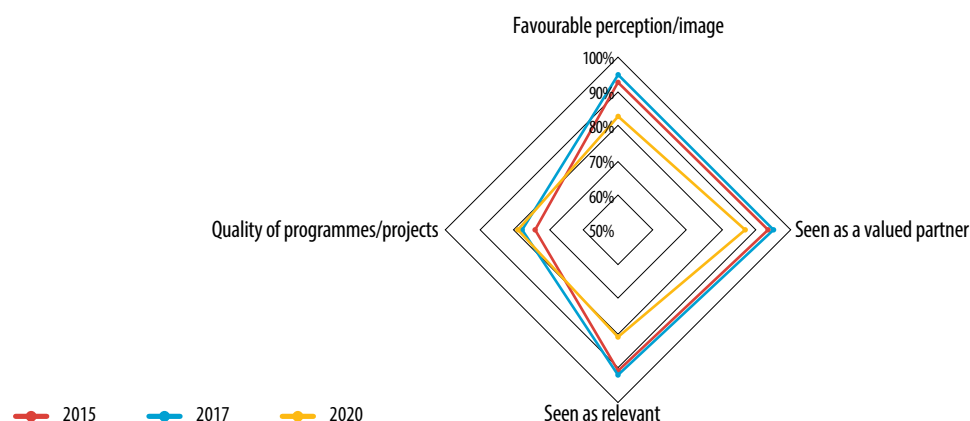
A trend analysis of the past three UNDP partnership surveys finds an 80 percent-plus favourable rating for governments' perception of UNDP's relevance, value and image. However, the ratings have been in decline. Donors, NGOs/civil society organizations and UN partners also have less favourable perceptions on all three dimensions, with a declining trend since 2017. The most significant decline between 2017 and 2020 was in favourable perception from NGO/civil society organizations (91 percent to 78 percent) and UN agencies (72 percent to 58 percent). The perception of relevance by donors also declined (81 percent to 68 percent).

With respect to the quality of programming, in 2020 around 79 percent of programme government respondents viewed the quality of programming favourably. In contrast, only 51 percent of donors and 44 percent of UN agencies viewed programme quality favourably, although this represents a marginal improvement in favourable perception since 2017 (Figure 4). It is important to note that these surveys have limitations;⁶⁸ they take place only every other year and have a limited number of responses, which vary by country. However, meta-synthesis of IEO evaluations and additional interviews for this evaluation did triangulate with the results. Stakeholder interviews were only slightly more positive about UNDP's relevance.

⁶⁷ Administrator's speech to the January 2021 Executive Board.

⁶⁸ The 2020 survey had 3,179 valid respondents (28 percent response rate) with 1,088 government respondents; the 2017 survey had 3,555 valid respondents (34 percent response rate) including 1,231 government responses; the 2015 survey had 3,519 respondents (33 percent response rate) with 1,177 government responses. The survey may also have a self-selection bias in which those who view UNDP most positively are likelier to respond.

FIGURE 4. Programme government perception of UNDP relevance and programme quality, 2015–2020



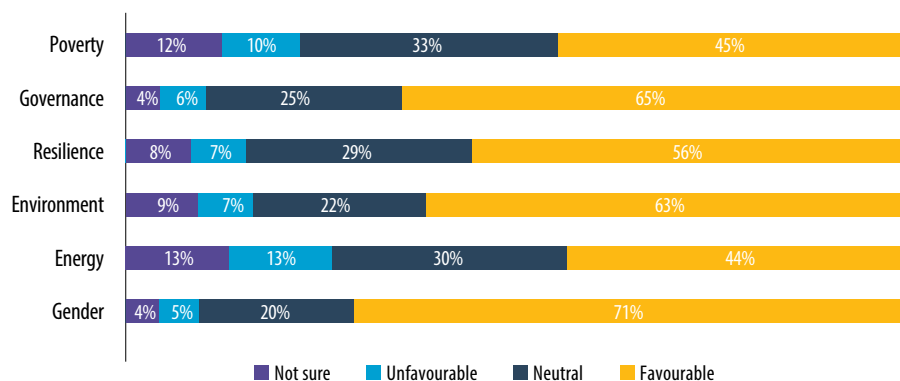
Source: 2015, 2017 and 2020 partnership survey reports

The results for specific areas of UNDP's work, corresponding with the signature solutions, are less positive (Figure 5). The areas in which participating government officials were least positive about UNDP's contribution are poverty (45 percent) and energy (44 percent). Energy is a relatively new area of work for UNDP, and while there are good results, it represents a smaller footprint for the organization. However, work for poverty eradication is at the core of UNDP's mandate. Results have been limited within a global context that is additionally challenging.

The perception score on poverty is also significantly lower than the results from the 2017 survey (62

percent) and lower than the 2015 survey score (53 percent). The survey data also triangulate with IEO synthesis of evaluations and interviews. It indicates that countries continue to highly value UNDP for its work in gender, governance, environment and resilience but have seen less UNDP impact on poverty and less engagement in initiatives for energy efficiency, although they are in ascendance. There is much recognition of UNDP's growing influence in environment, especially in helping governments mobilize resources and technical assistance from vertical funds. UNDP has played a particularly important role in small island developing states and some middle-income countries.⁶⁹

FIGURE 5. Programme government perception of UNDP contribution in UNDP priority areas



Source: 2020 partnership survey report

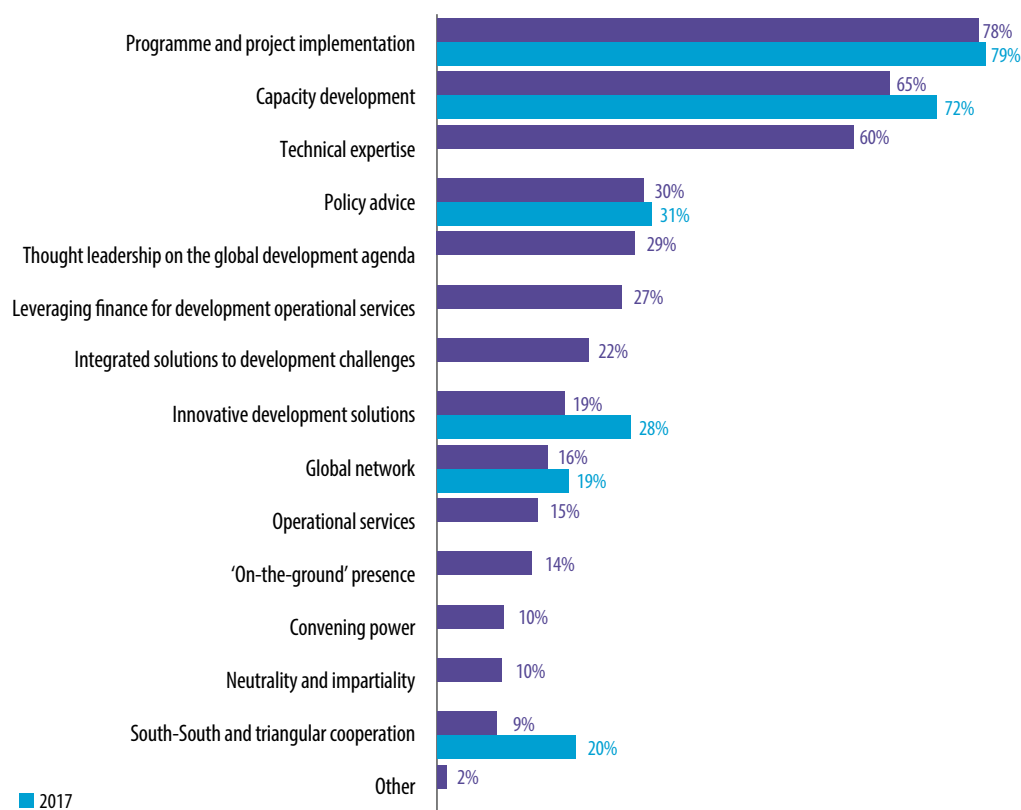
⁶⁹ From 2014 to 2019, the 10 countries with the highest share of Global Environment Facility funding in total expenditure were Niue (86 percent), Grenada (85 percent), Mauritius (82 percent), Samoa (81 percent), Malaysia (79 percent), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (76 percent), Thailand (66 percent), China (63 percent), Ecuador (61 percent) and South Africa (60 percent).

Stakeholders most valued UNDP where it is playing a more traditional role, especially on programme and project implementation (Figure 6). UNDP's programme and project implementation, capacity development and technical expertise – traditional UNDP capacities – were especially valued. Areas associated with the #NEXTGENUNDP,⁷⁰ such as integrated solutions to development challenges and innovative development solutions, were less likely to be perceived as ones where the organization adds value.

The survey trends match IEO meta-synthesis of evaluations. UNDP is most recognized in its role of project implementation, especially for procurement

and commissioning technical assistance but also for policy advice. Its convening role is highly appreciated, especially by governments in helping to promote strategic and sensitive dialogues, although this perception is not so favourable from civil society, according to IEO country programme evaluations. Stakeholders, when probed in interviews, also acknowledged that programmes and projects have been a channel for integrated development solutions and, to a lesser extent, for innovations. UN agencies and civil society tended to have a more critical view of integrated efforts, indicating they are not as visible and often lack the whole-of-society approach.

FIGURE 6. Programme government perception of UNDP added value



Source: 2017 and 2020 partnership survey reports⁷¹

⁷⁰ #nextgenUNDP refers to the Next Generation UNDP that builds on existing assets — worldwide presence, thought leadership and over 50 years of experience — to help countries and communities respond to a fast-changing development landscape, creating new solutions, building collaboration platforms and sparking new partnerships and instruments for development, disrupting the way the organization thinks, invests, manages and delivers so it can perform faster and better to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

⁷¹ 2017 survey results have been added where a comparable result was available. The 2017 question was also framed a bit differently: "Why does your organization/government work with UNDP?" In 2017 partners were asked to select three choices and in 2020 partners were asked to select three to five choices.

Finding 4. Key recurring challenges and areas for improvement — Despite improvements, results-based management, monitoring and reporting remain key areas for improvement, as does learning from successes and failures.

The Administrator's 2020 Report to the Executive Board reported the following results:

- 17 million people had better access to basic services.
- 5 million people (one third women) in 28 crisis-affected countries got a job or a better livelihood.
- 62 countries were supported to strengthen social protection.
- 7 million people across 27 countries gained access to justice.
- 65 parliaments enhanced their legislative and oversight capacities.
- 28 million protected acres in 55 countries were better managed.
- 48 percent of all new voters registered with UNDP support were women.

However, it is difficult to credibly link with adequate methodological rigour UNDP's work across its programmes to the changes in the global indicators and many other measures used by UNDP to monitor, assess and report progress and performance.

Results-based management, monitoring, reporting and learning systems in UNDP are insufficient and inadequate to sustain such claims. Although there have been efforts to improve UNDP's results framework and monitoring and evaluation practices, these remain areas of significant weakness, as highlighted in multiple audits and evaluations. Acknowledging that over the years UNDP has reported over-achieving IRRF milestones,

the Executive Board also has called for "UNDP to adopt more ambitious milestones for the outputs of the Strategic Plan 2018–2021 that have consistently been over-achieved".⁷² As part of the midterm review, UNDP presented to the Board an increase in the level of ambition in IRRF indicators.

IEO's detailed analysis of the IRRF in Annex 2 reveals a number of challenges and shows how this global aggregate reporting of country-based data under the IRRF can be misleading. Tier 1 (impact level) uses global indicators, and there is limited credible attempt to present data that would indicate plausible linkages between UNDP contribution to any progress reported at that level. Tier 2a, structured according to the three Strategic Plan 'outcomes', also draws largely from the SDG indicators framework. These were jointly identified and harmonized across UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and UN-Women, but UNDP has made limited attempts to assess the extent of its influence at this level.⁷³

The evaluation is not dismissing the use of SDG indicators; however, the timeliness of data is a significant challenge, with 'latest data' for 40 percent of Tier 2a indicators being from years before the start of the Strategic Plan. UNDP is clearly not responsible for the fact that several SDG indicators lack timely data or that the latest data are only available from a few years ago. However, efforts should be made to better align the data reported to plausible linkages of contribution that refer or clarify the years of UNDP interventions. It is misleading to use data from a previous cycle to report on initiatives that started in the current cycle. If the intent is to show results of initiatives that started in the previous cycles, that should be made clear in reports.

In addition, all indicators are given equal status; there is no distinction between indicators regardless of how many countries have submitted data. Moreover, some indicators related to the

⁷² In DP/2021/2 recording decisions from the 2020 Executive Board meeting, the Board, "Calls for UNDP to adopt more ambitious milestones for the outputs of the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 that have consistently been over-achieved, in order to ensure the targets set remain both realistic and more ambitious".

⁷³ https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/Executive%20Board/2019/Annual-session/dp2019-10_Annex%201.docx.

number of additional people that are benefiting from a set of initiatives supported by UNDP tell very little about UNDP's performance. Good efforts in small countries are lost, and even small changes in large countries will disproportionately affect the headline number.

UNDP tried to introduce output level indicators with both numbers and proportions,⁷⁴ with the aim of capturing the degree to which UNDP reached out to the population in need. However, UNDP reported in the IRRF annex to the Annual Report of Administrator challenges that have emerged while pursuing that attempt. These include the fact that some countries were unable to set sensible denominator values due to difficulty in estimating the population in need in specific areas and target groups. Inconsistent approaches have also been observed in denominator values (e.g. capturing the entire population of target groups in a country versus a smaller population group targeted by UNDP's interventions).

An alternative approach would be to take the country as a unit of analysis rather than try to measure organizational performance by aggregating indicators with problematic data across all countries. Taking the country as the unit of analysis would mean reporting on the number or percentage of countries that are performing well, based on their own individual needs and set goals. It is a shift away from ignoring context in the aggregation process, as what can be considered success in one country may not be the same in another. More specifically, taking the country as a unit of analysis could mean looking at the number of outcomes reaching milestones in each country programme document. The reporting could therefore be: In 2020, x percent of countries have achieved on average more than x percent of their outcome milestones, x per cent between 60 percent and 90 percent, and x percent below 60 percent.

Analysis of Tier 3 of the IRRF about the organizational effectiveness and efficiency performance also constitutes a weak basis for measuring UNDP performance. There are few indicators that really demonstrate how well the organization is performing

in the 'corporate' area. The methodological guidance in places lacks robustness and/or clarity; and the responses are insufficiently quality controlled. There has been insufficient customer feedback to validate the quality of services UNDP is providing.

UNDP only recently started improving means to collect and address customer feedback. In addition to receiving survey feedback on performance, the Global Shared Services Unit (GSSU) has established a new strategic performance and client management service unit approved by the Executive Group, as part of the new GSSU operating model. The new function has four areas of focus: oversight of performance of the GSSU, client (country office and agency) management, help desk support (contact centres) and service quality assurance. However, UNDP has not been reporting on it properly in the IRRF. The use of partnership survey data to measure customer service feedback is not sufficient. Information on services needs to be acquired with much more frequency and issues need to be quickly addressed.

The ROAR has improved but remains problematic when used to assess performance. IEO review of the ROAR shows a lack of consistency in how and whether country offices report under different sections of the survey. While some make creditable attempts to report on intermediate outcomes in response to relevant questions, others submit a list of activities and projects, focusing on what was done rather than what changed as a result of the interventions. There is also variation in the degree to which countries report on failure and challenges.

UNDP improved the ROAR's utility by encouraging reporting on key enablers and challenges. Unsupervised machine learning of challenges reported in the ROARs identified 12 key challenges of UNDP's programmatic work and 5 causes attributed to the challenges. However positive these changes are in capturing and analysing lessons, there is limited evidence of them being used for decision-making, course correction, scaling or improvement of results. There is significant scope for the ROAR to be improved, simplified, streamlined and automated.

⁷⁴ Output indicators 1.1.2.1, 1.1.2.2., 1.5.1.1, 1.6.2.1, 2.2.3.2, 3.1.1.2, 3.3.2.1 and 3.6.1.2.

The implementation of an organization-wide results-based management framework has been a significant challenge for many years, and criticized in multiple audits and evaluations. Given the decentralized nature of UNDP and the clear orientation of the Strategic Plan to adapt its approaches to different country contexts, a country-based approach to reporting on the number or percentage of countries that meet targets could provide a clearer basis for assessing performance. This would also avoid the problems associated with the collation of 'results' that mask the variable contribution of UNDP through its different approaches across different countries. Country performance should be assessed based on each country's target setting but should be used to identify lessons and to focus measures and human resources on improving performance.

With regard to the COVID-19 response, while the monitoring and reporting frameworks have been designed and co-led by UNDP and UNDCO and rolled out early, they are based on existing reporting and monitoring approaches and suffer from similar constraints in capturing results. From the outset, projects and financial allocations were given COVID-19 tags across programme areas. This was linked through to an internal portfolio-based dashboard and the UNDP transparency portal where project-specific focus information can be found. These three dashboards focus on fund allocation, expenditure and funding source. At the early stage of the pandemic, it is natural that UNDP captured financials (available resources, budget and expenditure). UNDP rolled out a mini-ROAR in September 2020 focused on the self-reporting of COVID-related country-level activities. Time will tell whether this approach avoids the pitfalls of the annual ROAR in terms of its usefulness for country offices.

The UN framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19 has an accompanying monitoring framework.⁷⁵ UNDP co-led, with UNDCO, the development of system-wide indicators to capture the results of the UN system's socioeconomic response to the pandemic. UNCTs are reporting against these indicators in UN-INFO, with consolidated results reflected in new dashboards on the [COVID-19 data portal](#).

In September 2020, UNDP issued its own monitoring guidance for country-level data collection and reporting.⁷⁶ Across the separate monitoring tools, it is unclear where the interaction or crossover is or if it allows for comprehensive monitoring of response across finance, self-reporting and indicator data. Nor is it clear how UNDP will use the information to inform future management decision-making, strategic interventions or fund allocation.

The need to strengthen results-based management, monitoring and evaluation of UNDP's work has been raised in the last two evaluations of UNDP strategic plans and in other IEO evaluations. Annual organizational audit reports have also consistently pointed to poor project and programme management, including implementation and performance monitoring, as a recurring issue. Efforts have been made in each strategic plan to address these issues. Indicators have been strengthened, new quality assurance processes have been put in place together with capacity-development efforts, and new platforms have been created to better analyse and report data — but these measures have been insufficient and ineffective to address the issues.

⁷⁵ UN, 'A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19', 2020.

⁷⁶ UNDP, 'COVID-19 Mini ROAR', 2020.

UNDP SUPPORT TO THE 2030 AGENDA AND THE SDGS

This section assesses whether UNDP is effectively supporting the accelerated achievement of the SDGs. First, it looks at UNDP's contribution to the SDGs. Second, it examines UNDP's integrated support to accelerating progress towards achievement of the SDGs through work of the SDG integration tools and offers. Third, it looks at gender equality and women's empowerment as a key accelerator of development. Finally, it examines UNDP's approach in working with the core dimensions of the 2030 Agenda: leaving no one behind, collaborative partnership and sustainable development.

Finding 5. UNDP contributions to the SDGs — UNDP has contributed to all SDGs, but over 50 percent of total programme expenditure has been related to SDG 1 (poverty reduction) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), which are also UNDP areas of comparative advantage in alignment with the Strategic Plan's vision. While UNDP has supported integrated approaches to achieving the SDGs with a large menu of tools, inadequate corporate reporting makes it unclear which of these effectively helped to accelerate progress towards achievement of each SDG, and to what extent.

There is a lack of clarity in the Strategic Plan in terms of guidance in support of specific SDGs. The plan states that it describes how the organization will support countries to achieve the SDGs.⁷⁷ However, the framework adopted within is not explicitly linked to the 2030 Agenda or to individual SDGs. Senior managers explained this was a deliberate decision, to stress UNDP's integrative approaches of working

across and between the related SDGs. Behind the legitimate quest for flexibility and integration, however, lie important risks and trade-offs. The broad focus has, on occasion, enabled UNDP to respond to national short-term needs and opportunities in all areas. On the other hand, the lack of focus has perpetuated the fragmentation of programmes and prevented UNDP from maximizing its added value where it has comparative strengths. The QCPR indicates that agencies should provide annual reporting on system-wide support to the SDGs and present aggregated information on system-wide results by 2021.

It is important to highlight that developing, retaining and accessing broad expertise to provide integrated support to nations does not preclude the development of focused initiatives in areas of acknowledged UNDP strength — such as governance, poverty reduction and environment — and anchoring them in the corresponding SDGs. The development of a few truly 'signature' UNDP solutions would benefit from economies of scale, could be expected to raise the profile of the organization by achieving significant results attributable to UNDP across multiple locations, and could potentially attract new funding.

Many UN agencies, funds and programmes are clear in identifying their primary SDGs but recognizing they address others too, if not all of them. UN-Women is perhaps the best example, focusing on SDG 5 and contributing to all others. It would also be difficult to find a UN entity that did

⁷⁷ The opening summary explaining the Strategic Plan asserts that, "Building on our experience to date, it describes how we will support countries to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals and related agreements".

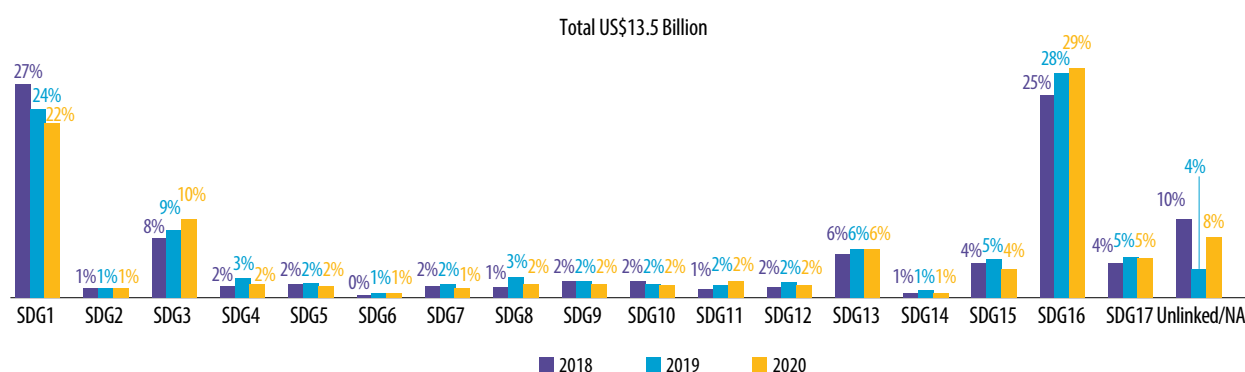
not contribute to the cross-cutting issues in SDG 5. FAO⁷⁸ and WFP⁷⁹ have useful infographics indicating how they contribute to all SDGs but focus on some.

The IRRF carries SDG indicators, but no specific guidance stating which SDGs UNDP will contribute to. While each signature solution is built on a theory of change with a mix of interventions designed to achieve significant progress towards key SDGs and targets, the Strategic Plan's theory of change does not include a robust results framework and suffers from the same lack of clarity as the conceptual framework. Similarly, in the annual reports of the Administrator, including the recent midterm review, there is no reporting on contributions to specific SDGs or the broader 2030 Agenda. Senior staff members involved in the development of the Strategic Plan explain that UNDP sees itself as an integrator across policy, programmatic and organizational silos. Moreover, it was noted

that UNDP is a 'development' agency, with a broad mandate.

In 2018, UNDP introduced a system of tagging its programme outputs to SDG targets.⁸⁰ Up to three targets can be selected by country offices and entered into the corporate planning and reporting system. Subsequently, the budget and expenditure data are divided equally by the number of SDG targets selected. Two targets could be for the same SDG, and there is no distinction between a primary contribution and a secondary one. These financial data indicate that UNDP contributed to all SDGs, but its largest contributions were to SDG 1 (poverty, 28 percent), SDG 16 (peace, justice and institutions, 24 percent), SDG 3 (health, 9 percent) and SDG 13 (climate action, 6 percent). Eleven SDGs accounted for only 1 percent to 3 percent each (Figure 7). UNDP reports on its resource contribution across the SDGs and SDG indicators on the transparency portal.

FIGURE 7. UNDP contribution to specific SDGs (programme expenditure), 2018–2020



Source: BPPS SDG marker dataset (2018–2020)

⁷⁸ <http://www.fao.org/sustainable-development-goals/en/>.

⁷⁹ https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000074429/download/?_ga=2.178468643.629956435.1614192594-1193143024.1613423085.

⁸⁰ The approach used for tagging outputs to SDG targets is standard across all entities of the UN development system and collected by the United Nations Development Coordination Office through its information system, UN INFO. As part of reporting on the Funding Compact, all United Nations development system entities are expected to report on expenditures disaggregated by Sustainable Development Goal by 2021. The 2017 baseline was 6 of 29 entities (21 percent) with the latest data (2019) showing 10 of 30 entities (33 percent).

The pattern of financial contribution to specific SDGs is different across regions and by different income typologies. Once the data are disaggregated, the distorting effects of large-scale interventions and large country programmes becomes clear. While regional bureaux generally prioritized SDG 1 and SDG 16, there is a large variation. The Regional Bureau for the Arab States tagged 58 percent of the expenditure under SDG 1 and the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific tagged 54 percent of resources under SDG 16. Low-income⁸¹ and high-income countries had their highest expenditure linked to SDG 16 (44 percent and 16 percent respectively); whereas the middle-income countries had their highest expenditure linked to SDG 1 (27 percent).

Controlling for outliers, large stabilization and medical procurement projects reverses the trend, with more low-income country initiatives tagged to SDG 1 (32 percent) and more middle-income country initiatives tagged to SDG 16 (25 percent). In high-income countries expenditures linked to SDG 1 reflected projects focused on technical assistance for national development plans, effective policy formulation, improvement of public services and public management. The allocation of resources, large or small, is not necessarily an indicator of the effectiveness of these investments. However, it is indicative of the organization's attention to SDGs 1 and 16.

Despite its focus of financial resources on just two of the SDGs, the Strategic Plan highlights the integrated nature of its mandate and vision. UNDP has established dedicated SDG integration workstreams to help countries develop integrated solutions. "The workstreams are not focused on individual SDGs but on the gaps between them – the missing pieces that can make the whole of the 2030 Agenda possible," notes UNDP's website on integrated solutions for sustainable development.⁸² Almost all country offices (121 out of 136) are engaged in SDG integration efforts of some sort.⁸³

However, there is no mapping available of the tools and approaches used by UNDP. Desk review of a variety of UNDP documents identified a list of about 40 tools and offers (Annex 3). Senior staff in the SDG integration unit stated that there are far more.

In addition to the SDG integration tools, investment has been made in strengthening UNDP capacities for integration in UNDP. Integration has been set at the centre of its architecture, with the intent to promote integration as a 'new way of working' for the entire organization. Particular efforts are under way in countries that are part of the SDG integration 'first movers', where UNDP is testing new approaches of integrated cross-team solutions. It is, however, early to assess the results of these efforts. Some of these examples are mentioned under the section on innovation, such as the portfolio of experimentation in Serbia. It is being developed to respond to the complex challenge of depopulation, generating new perspectives through innovative data sources and exploratory work to find potential integrated entry points for interventions.

UNDP has also been working across the UN system to strengthen SDG integration capacity. As co-chairs of the UNSDG task team for integrated policy support, UNDP drove the inter-agency agenda for a whole-of-system approach to supporting the SDGs (mainstreaming, acceleration and policy support, known as MAPS) and also supported strengthening UN staff capacity for SDG integration. For example, UNDP contributed to the SDG primer for resident coordinators, established (with UNICEF) a technical-level training course on MAPS and developed the UNSDG SDG acceleration toolkit to support countries.

At the heart of SDG integration support is the MAPS initiative. More than an umbrella for tools, MAPS is a mechanism through which UNDP mobilizes the UN system to deliver joint integrated support to countries on the SDGs, a key dimension of its integrator function. Examples are the Rapid

⁸¹ Income classification based on World Bank 2019 income classification.

⁸² 'SDG Integration' <https://sdgintegration.undp.org/>.

⁸³ UNDP, 'ROAR 2018', 2019.

Integrated Assessment and the SDG Accelerator and Bottleneck Assessment Tool.⁸⁴ Between 2016 and 2019, 25 partner agencies joined UNDP to support 51 countries through MAPS engagements. The results of these vary, and there is insufficient data systematized across different countries that had MAPS to rigorously assess results and impact beyond improved engagement and collaboration among actors to define goals.

At the start of this Strategic Plan, an evaluation of UNDP's contribution through the MAPS⁸⁵ found that most stakeholders felt it tended to have indirect catalytic value through raising awareness, introducing new tools and methods, and convening national stakeholders. The evaluation also noted that assessing both catalytic and systemic results could be properly done only after a longer period of time. More recent ICPEs indicate that UNDP had a key role in conceptualizing and promoting MAPS, but achieving sustained engagement of other partners to implement and evaluate actions and results has been a challenge.

UNDP is also highly praised for its support to national SDG and related reporting processes, such as the voluntary national reviews presented by national governments every year to the Economic and Social Council's high-level political forum on sustainable development.⁸⁶

To support SDG financing,⁸⁷ in early 2019 UNDP established the SDG finance sector hub, which supports national strategies to accelerate progress. Through the hub UNDP provides services across seven strategic areas of intervention (Figure 8), as well as four flagship initiatives: integrated national financing frameworks; SDG impact insurance; risk finance; and digital financing. It works across all areas with a focus on strengthening effective governance of both public and private finance. Within the seven areas of intervention, the finance sector hub has a menu of tools and products, which are available on the SDG finance knowledge platform, that country offices can select according to their context and demands.⁸⁸ SDG investor maps are being prepared in 12 countries and will be started in another 25.

UNDP has seen growing demand from partners to scale up its work around public finance, as well as private sector engagement, development and finance issues. Corporations are increasingly seeking UNDP's advisory services on strategic alignment with the SDGs. Unlocking private capital for the SDGs is something relatively new, but UNDP has a long track record of working in public finance and private sector development. The organization is well positioned to make relevant contributions and foster partnerships. So far, there are limited data to assess the results and impact of initiatives. They are at early stages, and data are not being systematically collected yet.

⁸⁴ MAPS is the UN development system's common approach to providing integrated support to UN Member States as they pursue the 2030 Agenda.

⁸⁵ Rava, Nenad, "Medium-term Evaluation of the Project 'Enabling Responsive, Coherent and Inclusive Support to the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'", UNDP, 2019.

⁸⁶ Voluntary national reviews aim to (a) facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and (b) strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the achievement of the SDGs.

⁸⁷ The UN estimates that \$5 trillion to \$7 trillion is needed annually to achieve the Goals. Continued official development assistance will be critical to leave no one behind and catalyse other financing streams, but it is insufficient for achievement of the SDGs. The financing needs for the SDGs therefore call for a comprehensive overhaul in the UN system's approach to financing. Specifically, this will require the UN to shift from the funding of individual projects to the financing of transformative change.

⁸⁸ <https://sdgfinance.undp.org/>.

FIGURE 8. Seven components of UNDP's support to countries for financing the SDGs



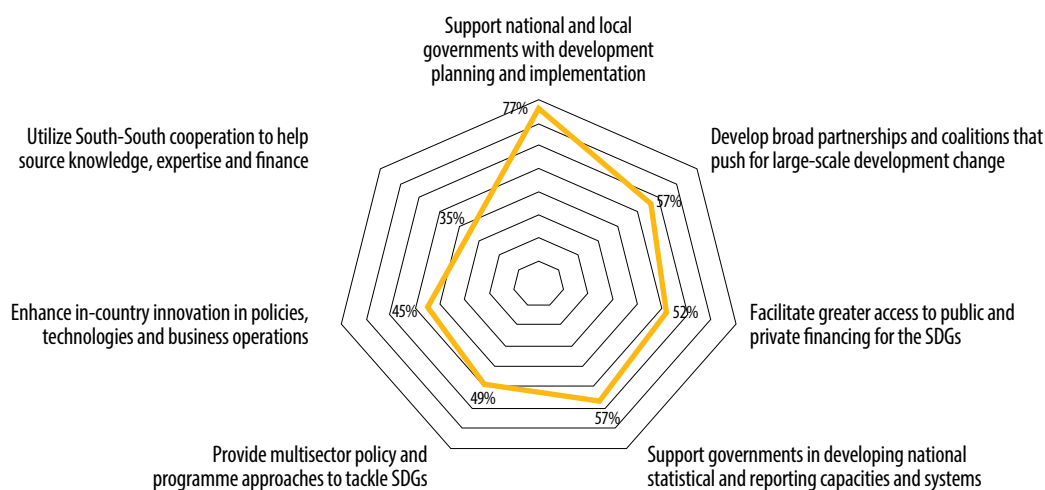
Source: UNDP finance sector hub

UNDP has made clear progress in developing SDG tools and offerings. It will need to make sure it has the capacity to effectively support them, ensure adequate follow-up and sustainability, and assess the results of all these initiatives. Some stakeholders highlighted the difficulty in keeping up with the many initiatives, including which ones are not continued, and understanding why. It is difficult to determine whether these tools and offers effectively helped to accelerate progress towards the SDGs due to inadequate results monitoring of these interventions. Baselines towards acceleration are often absent, data and disaggregation are often a problem, and the results of the policy support are not systematically mapped and reported.

According to programme country governments, UNDP can best contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by supporting national and local governments with development planning and implementation, followed by support for the development of broad coalitions. UNDP can also assist by developing national statistical and reporting capacities and facilitating access to public and private financing for the SDGs (Figure 9), all areas where UNDP has been active. According to self-reported data, UNDP helped 103 countries “to establish intragovernmental Sustainable Development Goal coordination structures, budgets, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and platforms for ‘whole-of-society’ approaches,”⁸⁹ but its results and impact are not always clear in terms of SDG acceleration.

⁸⁹ UNDP, ‘Midterm review of the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018–2021’, 2019.

FIGURE 9. Programme government perception of how UNDP can best contribute to the SDGs



Source: 2020 partnership survey.

Note: Partners were asked to select three to five options

The lack of appropriate and timely data for monitoring progress towards achievement of the SDGs as well as for analysis and evidence-based policymaking was often highlighted in the ICPEs and by UNDP staff as the most significant widespread challenge to properly assessing the results and impact of UNDP's contribution. The 2020 SDG report⁹⁰ notes that for 4 of the 17 goals, less than half of 194 countries have internationally comparable data. The situation is not much better for several other goals.

Many SDG indicators are only available with a significant time lag. In at least half of countries or areas in the global SDG indicators database, the latest data point available for SDG 1 is 2016 or earlier. UNDP has worked to improve the availability of data in many countries, but this continues to be a challenge. In March 2015, UNDP assumed co-custodianship for eight SDG indicators.⁹¹ In addition, UNDP has introduced new forms of analytics to help

countries establish future development scenarios. The multidimensional poverty index has become a flagship initiative in support of UNDP's human development reports and other national uses. It is valued by most stakeholders as a key contribution to improving availability of data for monitoring SDG 1 and leave no one behind, as well as for evidence-informed policymaking. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is limiting field data collection and therefore hampering the ability of national statistical offices to deliver the data needed to monitor the SDGs. Even before the pandemic, though, the lack of appropriate and timely statistics was a daunting challenge.⁹²

Finding 6. Gender equality and women's empowerment as a key SDG accelerator — The Strategic Plan promoted the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment as a key accelerator of development results. UNDP has now the opportunity to more clearly articulate

⁹⁰ United Nations, 'Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020', 2020.

⁹¹ Indicators 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.c.1, 16.6.2, 16.7.1, 16.7.2, 17.15.1, 17.16.1, UN Stats. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataContacts/Accessed 02/06/2020>.

⁹² United Nations, 'Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020', 2020.

how gender integration approaches can deliver more gender-transformative results⁹³ in all areas of development to accelerate achievement of the SDGs. Key constraints continue to be the lack of adequate financial and human resources.

UNDP was responsive in addressing some key challenges highlighted in past strategic plan evaluations to deepen attention to gender equality and women's empowerment, gender mainstreaming work and gender-disaggregated data. Together with the Gender Equality Strategy, the Strategic Plan has helped to better position gender equality and women's empowerment as a key mechanism to improve development programming across all thematic areas.

Comparing UNDP's gender equality strategy with those of five other bilateral and multilateral development agencies⁹⁴ reveals that UNDP's strategy is aimed at a deeper level of integration of gender equality that can serve as a catalyst for achieving multiple SDGs, not just SDG 5. A key factor is that UNDP encouraged country offices to have dedicated gender strategies with time-bound actions. Now, two thirds of country offices have a dedicated gender strategy. Just from 2018 to 2019 there was a 20 per cent increase in the number of countries creating such strategies, from 75 to 90.

There was, however, a missed opportunity to fully align the Gender Equality Strategy with the Strategic Plan. Also, more could have been done to promote

the visibility and accessibility of the strategy and the benefits of gender integration in the achievement and acceleration of the SDGs. For example, there was a lack of concrete examples illustrating why gender matters to diverse development outcomes. This information could act as an educational tool and guidance for country offices to undertake stronger gender mainstreaming work. Interviews revealed the challenge of achieving a deeper level of integration of gender equality as a catalyst for the SDGs due to a lack of clarity among staff and partners as to the relationship between gender equality and women's empowerment (beyond SDG 5) and other SDGs.

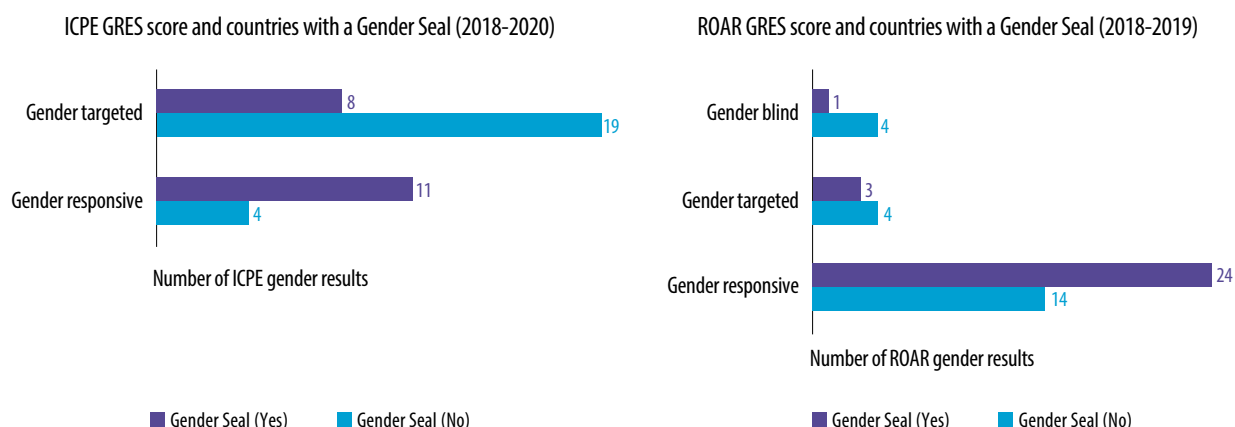
UNDP has gradually moved away from a focus on counting beneficiary numbers by sex to more integrated approaches aimed at responsive results that address the differential needs of men and women. Countries that have been through the Gender Equality Seal process show the most significant change in terms of gender-responsive results. Country offices awarded a Gender Equality Seal go through a multi-year process of gender audits of policies, programmes and culture. This process includes hiring a gender specialist, appointing a multidisciplinary gender task team that is responsible for gender integration and devoting more core resources to gender-specific projects. An analysis of ICPEs and ROAR results using IEO's GRES found that countries winning the Gender Equality Seal had more gender-responsive results than gender-targeted results (Figure 10).⁹⁵

⁹³ The UNDP IEO Gender Results Effectiveness Scale defines gender-transformative results as results that contributed to changes in norms, cultural values, power structures and the roots of gender inequalities and discriminations.

⁹⁴ A sample of five strategies was analysed (i.e., CIDA's International Feminist Assistance Strategy, DFID's Gender Strategy, UNFPA's Gender Equality Strategy 2018–2021, UN-Women's Strategic Plan 2018–2021, and NORAD's Gender Strategy).

⁹⁵ Two separate databases were created to analyse ICPEs and ROAR gender results against the country Gender Seal status. (1) An aggregate GRES score was created, combining all gender results coded and the gender coverage overall in the ICPE (2018–2020). Most of the ICPEs made a designation about the overall GRES categorization and this overarching score per country was added to the database, resulting in 42 overarching results. (2) Another results database for the ROAR (2018–2019) was created based on 50 results from 42 countries that had been marked as contributing to more than one SDG. This way it was possible to triangulate findings with the ICPE and explore the extent to which Gender Equality Seal countries still differ from non-Seal countries in terms of the results they produce.

FIGURE 10. ICPE and ROAR GRES ratings by Gender Equality Seal



Source: IEO GRES analysis of ICPEs and ROAR

Despite this progress, reviews of ICPEs and IEO thematic evaluations confirm there is still limited attention to integrating gender to a level that could sustainably accelerate development results with transformative measures. Many countries still don't have a gender specialist, and many gender focal points lack the in-depth capacities to advise on gender equality and women's empowerment, and they often accumulate other functions. ROAR data showed that in 2019, 65 percent of gender specialists were designated as contractors, without full staff integration and equal team participation privileges, and 38 percent of the gender specialists were only part time.

That means the majority of gender specialists are not privy to internal management conversations and team decision-making, and do not hold the power to influence and promote changes in the same way as full staff members. Interviews found that when gender specialists hold positions of power and more senior positions, such as in regional bureaux, it has significantly increased the attention programme and senior management staff give to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. In such offices there is also deeper integration and more events, trainings and workshops for staff to

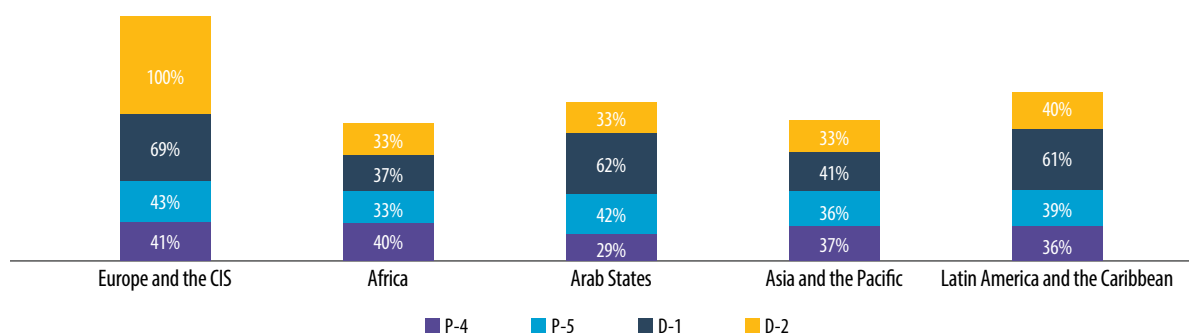
learn how to more fully address power and status differentials between men and women.

The UN System-wide Action Plan⁹⁶ requires country offices with annual budgets of \$25 million and above to have a dedicated gender adviser/specialist at the P4 or P5 level (or national equivalent). In 2019, 60 country offices had budgets of \$25 million and above, but there were only four gender specialists ranked in a P4/P5-equivalent position. This affects UNDP's potential to internalize the importance of gender as an accelerator for development.

In terms of gender parity, one of the pillars of People for 2030 is to foster and leverage diversity. It states that UNDP has an obligation to 'walk the talk' in alignment with the 2030 Agenda principle to leave no one behind. UNDP gender parity has improved (Figure 11). Yet despite this and the new cohort of female resident representatives, women remain underrepresented at senior levels of UNDP. This difference is starker at regional level, particularly in Africa country offices, where only 37 percent of D1 and 33 percent of D2 positions were held by women. Additionally, differences in how men and women experience UNDP culture still exist and need to be addressed.

⁹⁶ This UN system-wide accountability framework is designed to measure, monitor and drive progress towards a common set of standards aimed at gender equality and the empowerment of women. It applies to all entities, departments and offices of the UN system. [M03_S16_16_17_UN_SWAP_brochure.pdf](#).

FIGURE 11. Percent of women in higher professional levels by region, 2019



Source: UNDP gender parity reporting to the Chief Executives Board for Coordination, 2019

Note: Regions other than Africa have a very small number of D-2 positions, so a few positions skew the percentage⁹⁷

Insufficient financial resources are the key challenge in ensuring adequate human resources to integrate gender. There has been a minor increase (from 0.6 percent to 0.8 percent) in resources allocated to gender outcomes and the gender signature solution since the last Strategic Plan (2017) as country offices allocated core resources to under-funded gender programmes.⁹⁸ Despite the increase, the total amount of funding for gender, \$114 million for 2018–2020, is paltry in an organization covering 170 countries and territories that implemented billions of dollars in other areas. UNDP data on funding disaggregated by SDGs revealed that SDG 5 was in the bottom five in terms of expenditure, at \$232 million, or 2 percent of UNDP's total programme.

The gender marker tool,⁹⁹ which tracks expenditures for gender mainstreaming, helped to bring greater attention to gender-related financing. This was despite only a moderate increase in financing and challenges with accuracy¹⁰⁰ (which indicate it is time to review the guidance). There was a slightly increasing trend for GEN 2 (significant contribution to gender equality) and GEN3 (gender equality is the principal objective) of initiatives from 2016 to November 2020 (Figure 12). However, the suggested GEN 3 target of 15 percent of expenditures set out in the UNDP Gender Equality Strategy was not met, with the expenditure at 8 per cent during the current Strategic Plan.

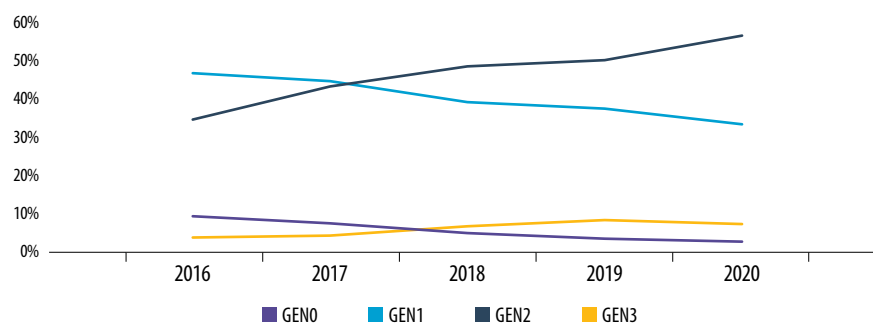
⁹⁷ D2 positions: Europe & CIS, 2; Africa, 12; Arab States, 6; Asia-Pacific, 3; Latin America & the Caribbean, 5.

⁹⁸ Core resources accounted for 28 percent of gender expenditure, a higher proportion than other signature solutions. But only 3 per cent of core resources were spent on signature solution 6.

⁹⁹ UNDP tool used to track expenditure towards gender mainstreaming. GEN 0 (no noticeable contributions to gender equality), GEN 1 (some contributions to gender equality), GEN 2 (significant contributions to gender equality), and GEN 3 (gender equality is the principal objective).

¹⁰⁰ There are variations in the way the gender marker codes are assigned, which has compromised the accuracy of the information. The marker is assigned at the design stage and mostly not adjusted afterwards. The quality assurance process for the marker varies by country office and region.

FIGURE 12. Percent expenditure by gender marker, 2016–2020



Source: Final programme financial data from BPPS (2016–2019) and preliminary 2020 data from BMS

The effect of COVID-19 on women has led some country offices to quickly adapt programming to respond to heightened gender inequalities and increases in sexual and gender-based violence. While UNDP’s global COVID 1.0 response¹⁰¹ was completely gender blind, gender became more visible in the COVID 2.0 response.¹⁰² Gender focal points consulted for the evaluation expressed disappointment about the lack of attention that gender equality and gender mainstreaming received in the initial COVID-19 offering.

Similarly, neither the green economy solution nor digital transformation elaborated on a gendered approach, despite the fact that girls, women, and marginalized groups face greater vulnerability to external shocks and crises, and are least likely to have access to technology at a time when more aspects of daily life have moved online.

The lack of focus on gender is also visible in GPN COVID-19 requests. Of the 222 requests made that have been completed/assigned, only 23 had any gender-specific component.¹⁰³ For the COVID 2.0 response, UNDP gender teams have produced

a range of COVID resources,¹⁰⁴ and the gender sensitivity checklist for the social and economic impact assessment and response. It is yet to be seen to what degree gender issues have been incorporated into response work and the impact that repurposing of funds for COVID-19 might have on existing gender activities, programmes and results.

Finding 7. The 2030 Agenda principles — Systemically and effectively operationalizing the key principles of the 2030 Agenda remains a challenge to the entire development community. UNDP has made concerted efforts to promote collaborative partnerships to support and finance the SDGs; to integrate approaches for more balanced consideration of their economic, social and environmental dimensions; and to mainstream the leave no one behind principle. UNDP is well positioned to increase its focus on the 2030 Agenda through leadership and contributions to inclusiveness and sustainability.

The Strategic Plan highlights three key principles of the 2030 Agenda: sustainable development, collaborative partnerships and leave no one behind.

¹⁰¹ UNDP, ‘Covid-19 UNDP integrated response’, April 2020.

¹⁰² UNDP, ‘Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030’, June 2020.

¹⁰³ STARS data accessed 8 September 2020.

¹⁰⁴ See UNDP, Dashboard Overview: Gender inequality and the COVID-19 crisis. 2020. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-and-covid-19-crisis-dashboard>.

Sustainable development is referenced in the 2030 Agenda in terms of: “the economic, social and environmental dimensions that need to be implemented in a balanced and integrated manner”. In addition, it notes, “there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development”. We inhabit a world “in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law, as well as an enabling environment at the national and international levels, are essential for sustainable development.” Keeping on the path of sustainable development is requiring greater resilience of countries and peoples and greater capacity to understand and mitigate the risks countries and people face. External and internal shocks combined with high levels of radical uncertainty and volatility make it increasingly difficult for countries to chart their own economic and social development. In addition, COVID-19 has placed many development gains under threat, and past gains are being shown to be less sustainable than first thought.

Eradicating poverty and building resilience for sustainable development have been at the centre of the vision of every UNDP strategic plan. However, despite efforts and improvements, while there are organizational policies conducive to promoting resilience, the linkages between intersecting elements of crises in support of sustainable development, including resilience to natural and human made disasters, are yet to be prioritized in implementation. This was the finding of the 2018 evaluation of UNDP support to poverty reduction in least developed countries, and it was still the case in 2019 and 2020, as detailed in more recent ICPEs.

Moreover, the 2020 evaluation of UNDP support to conflict-affected countries concluded that, despite efforts and improvements, compartmentalized responses to different crises at the country level had shortcomings in addressing cross-cutting and intersecting elements of the crises in a sustainable way. UNDP’s poverty reduction efforts in the context of multiple crises and climate-related shocks have not yet effectively and sustainably addressed the combined effect of multiple crises and resulting vulnerabilities.

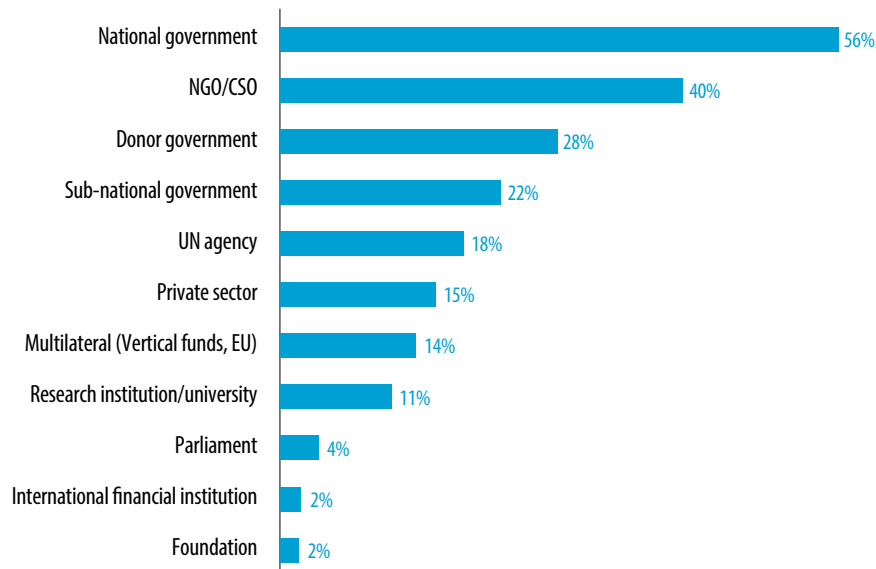
The 2020 evaluation of UNDP’s support to adaptation to the impacts of climate change concluded that, despite efforts and improvements, UNDP’s adaptation portfolio is highly fragmented, reflecting the different emphases and interests of different funding streams in the climate, humanitarian and development realms. Moreover, UNDP does not have a robust system to support mainstreaming the consideration of climate risks across programmes. Another common issue hindering sustainable development in UNDP initiatives, as found in the meta-synthesis of ICPEs, is that UNDP’s programmes lean towards short-term programming, partly reflecting its heavy reliance on project-based funding. This has reduced UNDP’s contribution to accelerating peace, poverty and sustainable development.

Overall, what the meta-synthesis of thematic and ICPE evaluations highlights is that the sustainability of results very much depends on systemic approaches. No single development agency can ensure sustainability of complex issues on its own or by tackling only one angle of development issues. To build comprehensive sustainability strategies, partnerships are essential. However, formulating holistic partnership strategies at country level to support and finance the SDGs continues to be a challenge.

Collaborative partnership is reinforced in the Strategic Plan “as a catalyst and facilitator of support from the United Nations system”. In addition, UNDP has committed to helping governments to convene across line ministries and development partners to promote whole-of-government and whole-of-society responses vital for transformational change. UNDP’s integrator function across policy, programmatic and organizational silos was expected to be at the core of the UNDP corporate partnership approach, but it is not always evident on the ground.

To help track efforts towards the whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches, UNDP has introduced a partnerships marker that labels relevant partners for each project. Figure 13 aggregates the types of partnership and indicates that UNDP partners mostly with traditional partners such as national governments, civil society and donors.

FIGURE 13. Percent of initiatives tagged to different partners, 2019 (N=14,222)



Source: CPS database extraction from BPPS¹⁰⁵

IEO evaluations highlighted good collaborations, but less evident were more holistic partnership strategies with adequate focus on integrated collaboration for sustainability of results. Overall, UNDP is viewed as a long-standing trusted partner of governments. However, with other development partners UNDP's partnership approach has mostly targeted diverse inclusion, representation and funding, but not full participation. The 2020 partnership survey highlighted that only 44 percent of UN entities felt that UNDP consults and involves partners in key initiatives, while that opinion was held by 77 percent of national governments and 71 percent of NGOs/civil society organizations.

The 2020 conflict evaluation and the evaluation of the Syria regional refugee response both found that UNDP has made concerted efforts to strengthen partnerships with UN agencies, particularly humanitarian agencies, and international financial institutions. This is significant given the corporate

emphasis on furthering 'new ways of working' and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. UNDP and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees took unprecedented measures to forge a partnership in response to protracted refugee crises at global, regional and national levels. The Syria regional refugee response provided a framework for the activities of UN and other agencies at regional and country levels to address humanitarian and development issues simultaneously, using a resilience approach.

However, challenges remained with coordination structures with this model. At the country level, mission transitions with the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs could be considerably improved, particularly in the context of delinking the resident coordinator function. Also, there were several suboptimal partnerships involving the United Nations and other agencies or mission. For example, the new ways of working were yet to

¹⁰⁵ Country offices can choose up to five partner organizations, which have been combined into larger partner categories.

manifest in practice in the Sahel, where UNDP did not have much success in forging programmatic partnerships with humanitarian and development agencies for a consolidated response.

Meta-analysis of ICPEs found UNDP made consistent efforts to forge partnerships with UN agencies, but there were also numerous observations on poor inter-agency coordination, even in the case of 'One UN' countries. The analysis found that the limited resources of UN agencies in general and an increasingly competitive environment for resource mobilization have led to more ad hoc rather than systematic collaboration.

Achievement of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda cannot happen without partnership and commitment from the private sector; however, that has proved difficult for UNDP despite efforts and some progress. The UNDP private sector strategy 2018–2022, launched in 2020, outlines the need for greater private sector engagement and more effort by UNDP to partner with the private sector across a range of development offers. Many of these are in the nascent stages, and progress has been slow due to a lack of concerted efforts at the programming level and significant administrative bottlenecks. In 2019, the greatest number of initiatives involving private sector partnerships were in Asia (24 percent), followed by Africa (22 percent) and Latin America (20 percent).¹⁰⁶ The partnership marker data do not allow for disaggregation of different types of private sector partners, which might be a helpful data source for decision-making as these partnerships expand.

With COVID-19 reminding everyone of global interdependence, UNDP and other UN agencies have accelerated their efforts to build synergistic partnerships in line with the premise of the reforms launched in 2017. UNDP has taken the opportunity to review its current collaboration landscape and strengthen partnerships as the international community enters a crucial decade for the acceleration of the 2030 Agenda, the delinking

of the resident coordinator function and the response to COVID-19. Letters exchanged among UNDP, FAO, ILO and IOM document renewed commitment to partner and map out engagement pathways focused around strategic collaboration on the socioeconomic response to COVID-19; joint outreach and advice to country and regional offices; roll-out of joint funding and advocacy plans in selected programming areas and countries; and establishment of regular technical and strategic exchanges and secondments.

The Strategic Plan highlights South-South and triangular cooperation as an essential instrument for collaborative partnership and to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Country programmes are mainstreaming these forms of cooperation. This is a component of the quality assurance process for all new country programmes. Through a self-reported marker UNDP tracked such cooperation in 2020, finding that over 120 country offices advanced South-South and triangular cooperation through 1,296 projects. The majority of these (57 percent) reportedly led to capacity-building activities among partners on the ground, followed by initiatives that primarily led to exchange of information (33 percent). In 15 percent UNDP facilitated partnerships, including through investments and mechanisms for scaling up.¹⁰⁷

The meta-synthesis of ICPEs also found that South-South and triangular cooperation is often highlighted as one of UNDP's key value propositions to generate new development solutions. However, ICPEs also showed that such cooperation is still underutilized by programmes, and mainstreaming it in country programmes has not been enough to actually systematize a more effective approach to knowledge management and cooperation. There is still space for a more proactive and systematic approach to South-South and triangular cooperation to document learning for replication and scaling up of results. Further systematization was recommended in the previous strategic plan evaluation.

¹⁰⁶ CPS database extract from BPPS.

¹⁰⁷ Project Marker PowerBI, accessed November 2020. While country offices are supposed to choose only one South-South/triangular cooperation option, a small number chose more than one option.

The principle of leaving no one behind, promoted by the Strategic Plan in support of the 2030 Agenda, is operationalized in UNDP advocacy for and support to marginalized populations and those left behind. The ICPE meta-synthesis indicates the organization has often supported the development of legal frameworks and policies, but it has given less attention to implementing policies and transformative measures that have a more integrated approach to addressing the underlying causes of marginalization.

The lack of disaggregated data also presents challenges in understanding how much progress has been made in addressing the specific needs of those left behind. The overarching SDG ethos of leaving no one behind calls for data that are not just high quality, timely and reliable, but also disaggregated by income, gender, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. This specification adds new layers of complexity, and in some cases political sensitivity, to long-standing national data-gathering challenges. Noting that the SDGs require data-intensive efforts, UNDP country office managers highlighted that many national surveys, which are the major sources of data for SDGs, do not generate disaggregated data on location and social groups. The data mostly provide national averages, with rare exceptions. Key national surveys are generally conducted only every five to seven years.

While overall progress on leave no one behind principles remains unclear due to lack of data, addressing the development challenges of the most vulnerable people has always been at the core of UNDP's mandate. During the current Strategic Plan, UNDP advocated for minority rights and supported anti-discrimination legislation and institutional strengthening to protect the rights of minorities and expand vulnerable populations' access to justice. UNDP supported the development of national human rights strategies and action plans and helped strengthen human rights institutions, including government capacity to report to

international human rights treaty bodies. UNDP has also conducted human rights awareness and anti-discrimination campaigns and supported access to legal aid for the most vulnerable people, especially in conflict settings. Further, the evaluation of UNDP work in middle-income countries highlighted various instances in which UNDP combated discrimination against indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and religious and sexual minorities. However, limited evidence is available of sustainable results and transformative change.

Implementation of policies for transformative change has been a particular challenge. Much legislation that UNDP has helped draft faces challenges in being passed, and some legislation that was passed faces challenges with implementation and enforcement of change. Some challenges are political and beyond UNDP's control. But there were instances in which UNDP missed opportunities to adopt more integrated approaches and partnerships to ensure the necessary buy-in and civil pressure and participation. In particular, limited attention has been paid to building the capacity of civil society to aid its engagement in civil monitoring of policy implementation.

A significant example of UNDP's support to countries has been its technical inputs and financial assistance in preparing 'leave no one behind' assessments for national SDG reports and voluntary national reviews. Key target groups — such as people with disabilities, women and children, and elderly people — were considered in almost all such reviews, but less than half of the reports considered poor people, ethnic minorities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer and intersex people (LGBTQI).¹⁰⁸

Worth noting has been UNDP's effort to exercise its leave no one behind thought leadership through the Human Development Report Office. The 2019 human development report focused on non-income poverty. Since 2018, the office, in partnership with the Oxford Policy and Poverty Initiative, has published an annual global multidimensional

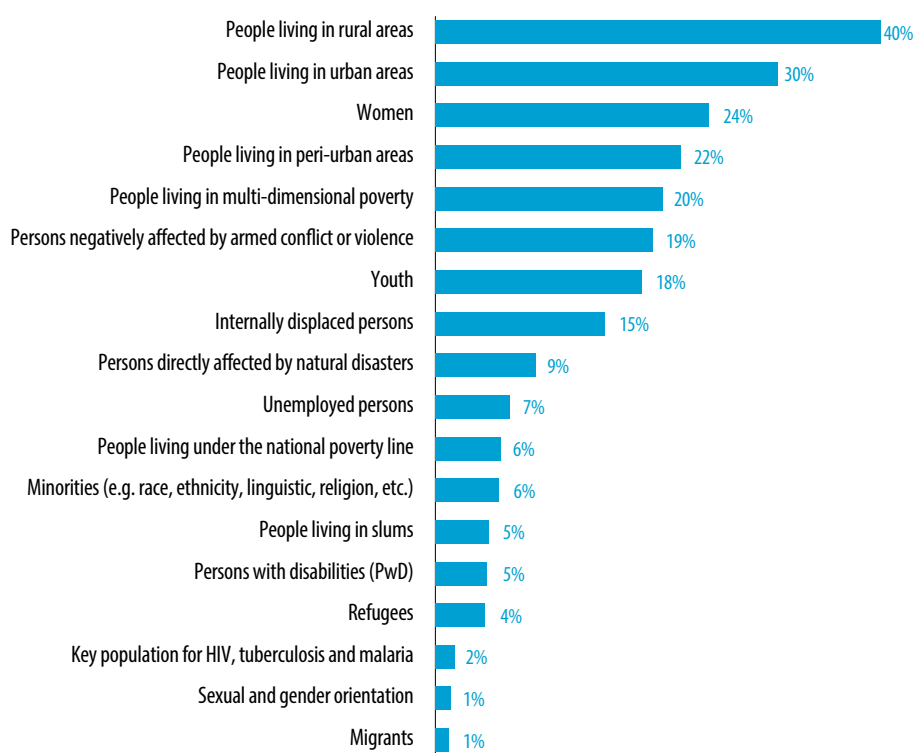
¹⁰⁸ UN DESA, 'Voluntary National Reviews Reports: What do they (not) reveal?', July 2020 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/CDP-bp-2020-50.pdf>.

poverty index that has been methodologically aligned to monitoring of progress towards SDG 1 and data on leave no one behind. In 2020, the office also launched the gender social norms index, which measures how social beliefs obstruct gender equality in areas such as politics, work and education. It contains data from 75 countries, covering over 80 percent of the world's population.

To identify the target groups of interventions across its portfolio, UNDP launched a leave no one behind

marker, labelling each project with its target leave no one behind group (Figure 14). While recognizing that the categories are not mutually exclusive, and aggregation in some cases provides limited understanding of the groups targeted, the trends suggest there is more frequent consideration of groups such as women and youth, and as well a geographical consideration of vulnerabilities that more commonly afflict people in rural areas. There is less frequent consideration of migrants and issues of sexual and gender orientation.

FIGURE 14. Percent of initiatives that target different 'leave no one behind' groups (n=14,222)



Source: CPS database extraction 2019 from BPPS

Note: Country offices can choose up to five markers as main beneficiaries for the initiatives

Cross-referencing with the marker identifying the type of work UNDP is engaged in,¹⁰⁹ the leave no one behind marker provides an understanding of how UNDP has engaged with different target

groups. While UNDP's work targeting most leave no one behind groups focused strongly on capacity building,¹¹⁰ other types of interventions were also dominant in UNDP's approach. For example, a

¹⁰⁹ The markers refer to the type of work that UNDP is engaged in; the country office can select up to three initiatives from the following list: capacity development; convening/partnerships/knowledge sharing; data collection and analysis; direct support/service delivery; innovative approaches; institutional mechanism and system building; policy advice.

¹¹⁰ Exceptions: internally displaced persons, armed conflict and refugees.

large portion of UNDP interventions targeting internally displaced people (73 percent), people affected by armed conflict and violence (62 percent), unemployed people (50 percent), people with disability (40 percent) and refugees (39 percent) focused on direct support to service delivery. Institutional mechanisms and systems building were the focus of a large percentage of UNDP initiatives targeting minorities (50 percent), sexual and gender orientation (43 percent), women (41 percent) and youth (38 percent).

People with disability accounted for a small portion of UNDP's portfolio, but according to ICPEs and interviews, this group is receiving increased attention. UNDP is particularly praised by Member States where it has been able to promote and strengthen inclusive institutions and deliver results with human rights-based approaches. Along with assistance on income-generation opportunities, UNDP aided governments in implementing strategies and action plans and developing guidelines and legal review of the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

At the same time, individuals with disability have not been treated as core beneficiaries in most efforts to combat HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. The materials produced on ways of reducing the risk of contracting these diseases is often in formats inaccessible to people with disability. UNDP has yet to include organizations of people with disability, not just in consultations concerning disability, but as a relevant civil society partner in all development processes and initiatives. Programmes also lack adequate use of indicators that measure disability inclusion in country programmes and systematic collection and use of disaggregated disability data as well as relevant capacity in country offices to address disability issues.

UNDP also increased its involvement in promoting the rights of LGBTQI people, albeit from a very low baseline. UNDP's role in advancing their rights and those of people living with HIV/AIDS has been significant particularly in partnership with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Youth are a key target group that has been left behind, and they are linked with multiple development issues. Youth have increasingly received attention as key partners and beneficiaries of various initiatives in UNDP's portfolio, although results have varied. There is little to no evidence of results in successfully promoting social cohesion and preventing violence and extremism. In conflict-affected settings most youth employment interventions are one-off, short-term opportunities with limited evidence of sustainability. Modest success has been found in other areas. Through its innovation work, UNDP has developed important regional network platforms to engage youth in implementing new approaches to achieving the SDGs.

Overall, systemically operationalizing leave no one behind remains a significant challenge. Despite the increased effort, UNDP has yet to consistently and effectively integrate into its programmes the five factors key to understanding who is being left behind and why: (a) discrimination; (b) place of residence; (c) socioeconomic status; (d) governance; and (e) vulnerability to shocks. This should include more focus on addressing underlying and root causes of the disadvantages to empower those who are being left behind — or who are at risk of being left behind — and to enact inclusive and integrated strategies and policies that could help to accelerate achievement of the SDGs.

In 2018, UNDP developed a discussion paper on what it means to leave no one behind.¹¹¹ It suggested a framework that governments and stakeholders could use in their countries that would feed into UNSDG operational interim guidance to country offices on leaving no one behind.¹¹² There is evidence of countries creating leave no one behind working groups and undertaking deeper analysis, as well as finding opportunities to catalyse change through integrated policies, plans and programme implementation. However, some of these efforts are in early stages, and interviews with human rights, women's rights and LGBTQI activists reveal that these are some of the most challenging issues to address with governments. In addition, addressing the needs of people with disability continues to be financially daunting.

¹¹¹ UNDP, 'What Does It Mean to Leave No One Behind?' August 2018.

¹¹² UNSDG, 'Leaving No One Behind. A UNSDG guide for UN country teams' (interim draft), April 2019.

BUSINESS MODEL INNOVATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

UNDP defines its business model as a combination of systems, processes, instruments, partnerships and financing that effectively and efficiently support the delivery of programmes and projects. Two streams of performance and innovation presented in the Strategic Plan were expected to improve UNDP's business model by adapting UNDP's underlying ways of working and the capabilities required to provide an integrated service offer rooted in the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. This section assesses how effectively and efficiently UNDP has evolved and innovated its business model and is managing its assets, capabilities and finances to make the organization more nimble, innovative and effective in its contribution to improved development results.

5.1 Innovation

The innovation stream of work was expected to help UNDP evolve and innovate its business model. Its aim is to explore new ways of doing business through idea generation at country and regional levels, business case development, testing, iterative improvement and scaling up or down when feasible. Innovation was expected to permeate all areas of the organization, leading to process efficiencies and improved institutional performance. The following key findings pertain to the operationalization of the innovation stream and UNDP's overall approach to innovation.

Finding 8. Innovation agenda — The elevation of innovation in the Strategic Plan has been followed by important investments in expanding capabilities and mainstreaming innovation efforts across the

organization. Important steps have been taken to improve the enabling environment for innovation. UNDP has yet to sufficiently adapt its rules and procedures to fully leverage innovative programming, partnerships and financing opportunities.

The innovation facility was established in 2014, operating as a seed-funding mechanism that would help to establish the foundations for an innovation agenda in UNDP. The innovation facility supported 142 projects in 78 countries, working to build experience with social innovation techniques and encouraging the use of technology in interventions and private sector engagement. It supported the development of dedicated capacity at regional level in the RBEC, RBAP, RBAS. These regions have built a critical mass of projects to enable learning and the development of internal capabilities for innovation, including a growing number of government innovation labs that have either been scaled up by government or continue to be co-hosted by UNDP.¹¹³ An evaluation of the innovation facility in 2018¹¹⁴ rated it as successful but highlighted the need to further institutionalize innovation. It recommended among other things strengthening coordination and governance arrangements to drive synergies; integrating new approaches in UNDP's work; further empowering country offices to participate in the innovation process; and reviewing administrative inhibitors that impede innovation within UNDP.¹¹⁵

The accelerator lab network was established in 2019, increasing the prominence of and ambition

¹¹³ These labs are located in three regions: RBEC (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Ukraine); RBAP (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka); and RBAS (Bahrain, Egypt).

¹¹⁴ UNDP, 'Decentralized Evaluation of UNDP Innovation Facility', 2018.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, see recommendations.

for innovation as UNDP embarked on the 2018–2021 Strategic Plan. It signalled a shift to incorporating social innovation into UNDP’s working methods and to accelerating use of experimentation and entrepreneurial behaviour across the organization. This was followed by an increase in corporate investments, as illustrated with the launch of the flagship accelerator labs network initiative in 78 countries. An allocation of \$71 million was made to the network, one third of the funding from UNDP core resources. This represents about seven times the amount of funding mobilized for the innovation facility during the 2014–2017 period, permitting an increase in staff dedicated to innovation: 180 accelerator lab staff were deployed in the initial 60 accelerator labs.

Also supporting innovation were efforts to formalize existing capacity and gradually build new capacity in regional hubs to support country initiatives. In 2019 this included repositioning the Singapore policy centre on public policy excellence to emphasize science, technology and innovation for the SDGs, and consolidating the innovation portfolio under a strategic innovation unit. An innovation unit is being established in the Istanbul regional hub, housed under the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support (BPPS). The consolidation of this unit marks an additional step in UNDP’s innovation journey, moving it from a bottom-up approach to a more deliberate management of innovation, along with alignment with other, comparable UN organizations.¹¹⁶

The innovation agenda is also gradually shifting aim, from a focus on the use of specific techniques to leveraging innovation and UNDP assets for systems transformation and attention to emerging development challenges. As part of this process, in

2019 the innovation facility reoriented its previous seed-funding approach.¹¹⁷ While previously it focused on larger scale demonstrations, it is now emphasizing solutions to complex emerging challenges in seven countries.¹¹⁸ This is taking place through the development of portfolios of experimentation, reflecting the understanding that single point solutions are not sufficient to address complexity.

For example, in Serbia a portfolio of experiments is being developed to respond to the complex challenge of depopulation. It is using innovative data sources and exploration to find potential entry points for interventions. In addition, the innovation teams have been rolling out ‘sensemaking,’¹¹⁹ portfolio acceleration and systems mapping protocols¹²⁰ in selected volunteer country offices. This internal, facilitated change process is aimed at identifying leverage points in complex systemic issues and developing a portfolio of experiments to address them. This is still at an early stage but there is positive feedback in the use of the protocols from participants.

To support these efforts, UNDP is working to improve its enabling environment. It has made significant policy changes, including adoption of the ‘People for 2030’ strategy, the revised enterprise risk management policy, a revised resource allocation framework and new country incentives. Another important aspect is leadership commitment, evidenced through interviews in the course of this evaluation and in communications from the UNDP Administrator through monthly innovation calls with UNDP country staff.

Despite this progress, UNDP has yet to fully address bottlenecks in administrative procedures that inhibit innovation. The need to do so was noted in the previous strategic plan evaluation, the joint

¹¹⁶ UNFPA, ‘Formative Evaluation of the UNFPA Innovation Initiative- How United Nations Innovation Network Members Approach Innovation’, 2017.

¹¹⁷ UNDP, ‘Innovation Facility 2.0: Concept Note’, 2019.

¹¹⁸ Currently, this approach is being tested in Bolivia, Burundi, Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People, Ghana, Serbia, Tunisia and Viet Nam.

¹¹⁹ Sensemaking is a concept deriving from organizational studies first introduced by Karl E. Weick in the 1970s. Recognized as a key aspect of leadership capability, sensemaking involves coming up with plausible understandings and meanings; testing them with others and via action; and then refining one’s understandings or abandoning them in favour of new ones that better explain a shifting reality.

¹²⁰ See: <https://medium.com/@undp.ric/how-can-we-accelerate-the-effects-of-portfolios-of-development-projects-764f7bb36cf8>. The UNDP innovation team developed and piloted a protocol that combines sensemaking and systems thinking theory with the aim of supporting country offices in adopting a portfolio approach to its projects and identifying leverage points to accelerate the combined effects of projects.

assessment of UNDP institutional effectiveness conducted by OAI and IEO,¹²¹ and the decentralized evaluation of the innovation facility. The current Strategic Plan recognized this by emphasizing the linkage between the two institutional enablers, the performance and innovation streams, which reinforce each other. Constructive, though ad-hoc, efforts have been made to explore solutions to operational issues, but there has been little momentum to galvanize sufficient policy changes.¹²² Administrative challenges continue to hinder the innovation process and limit the nimbleness of accelerator labs and other innovation initiatives.

UNDP rules and procedures allow relative autonomy for decentralized risk-taking by country offices, but there has not always been sufficient flexibility to support institutionalizing innovation and adopting new ways of working. This is particularly the case given UNDP's risk-averse culture. In interviews, staff members consistently emphasized various difficulties, including varying interpretation of rules and lengthy negotiations needed to move forward. Fear of negative audits and financial risks often outweigh the reputational and operational risks of inaction, as risk logs show.

Slow decision-making involving private sector engagement is an issue regularly raised by most stakeholders consulted, and this impediment invariably limits UNDP's ability to engage with the private sector. The due diligence process for such partnerships specified in the 2013 due diligence policy is lengthy and discouraging for both country offices and private sector partners. At the UN system-wide level, policies for consideration of private sector partnerships have previously been noted as outdated and not reflecting the renewed support for private sector engagement promoted by the 2030 Agenda.¹²³ As highlighted in the evaluation of UNDP's work in middle-income countries, private sector engagement brings

both opportunities and risks that remain difficult for country offices to manage.¹²⁴ The same complications apply to experiments, pilot projects and full-fledged projects, limiting UNDP's ability to be reactive and nimble when engaging with the private sector.

Another complication emerging as UNDP seeks to position itself in social innovation comes from its standard basic assistance agreements, which govern UN engagements in programme countries and include provisions that pose a significant challenge for engaging with local innovation systems and private sector. Adapted to the realities of traditional project implementation, ownership rights to any discoveries or work emerging from collaboration with the private sector belong to UNDP, and full right of use is granted only to national governments. This is a constraint for private sector engagement, particularly in the innovation process, which puts a premium on co-creation. In an effort to address these challenges, the organization is taking steps to further streamline processes and procedures and to define a risk appetite that is more conducive to a supportive environment for innovation.

Finding 9. Accelerator labs — While still at an early stage to consider results, the implementation of the accelerator lab network is generating greater exposure for social innovation techniques and digital technologies at country level. It is also setting the basis for more participatory, contextualized and integrated approaches to understanding development challenges and implementing solutions.

Building on the lessons from the innovation facility and experience in supporting government-led innovation labs, accelerator labs were launched in 60 offices covering 78 countries. The aim is to (a) increase country office and local capabilities for scanning, sensemaking and experimentation for sustainable development, and (b) scale up new development solutions at country level. Building

¹²¹ UNDP IEO, 'Joint Assessment of UNDP Institutional Effectiveness,' 2017, [United Nations Development Programme -Evaluation - Institutional Assessment \(undp.org\)](#).

¹²² UNDP, 'Operations Hackathon Workshop, Summary Meeting,' October 2019.

¹²³ JIU/REP/2017/8, 'Private Sector Partnership Arrangements in the Context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'.

¹²⁴ UNDP IEO, 'UNDP Support to Development Cooperation in Middle-Income Countries,' 2020.

on UNDP's universal presence, the labs reflect an explicit intent to distribute innovation capabilities to country offices and respond to the call to explore new ways of working brought forward by the Strategic Plan. Each accelerator lab defined its main learning challenges in consultation with its respective country office, making the lab a facilitator of local innovation ecosystems. Supported by a global team, the 60 accelerator labs are designed to operate as a network of ecosystems, with each lab sharing the experience and insights drawn from its work to collectively accelerate learning.

The strategy of the accelerator lab marks a useful departure from traditional project approaches and from the more centralized approach to innovation, which tended to revolve around the provision of seed funding in the United Nations and the private sector. Each lab has three staff working under the supervision of the resident representative with a modest operating budget.¹²⁵ Compared with the previous seed-funding mechanism of the innovation facility, this approach is accelerating exposure and learning among UNDP country offices and promoting entrepreneurial behaviour through exploration. The accelerator lab approach and the configuration of the 60 labs demonstrate greater sophistication in the use of new data sources and innovation techniques compared with previous initiatives. Reports suggest the labs on average use seven innovation tools/methods and make use of two new/digital sources.

The capacity and licence to explore of accelerator labs has enabled UNDP to generate additional value propositions through its readiness to collaborate, co-create and grow strategic partnerships, as opposed to the traditional project focus on financially driven partnerships. The accelerator labs have leveraged unusual partnerships and existing

capabilities. They have given voice to and enabled participation by atypical stakeholders from the informal sector.¹²⁶

Interviews revealed that the nature of the partnerships was also an important qualitative attribute, by enabling more opportunities for grassroots engagement that is open, collaborative and appropriate to the context. This type of partnership engagement breaks with the usual consultancy-driven solutions that underpin UNDP projects. Various ICPEs and thematic evaluations have also highlighted the opportunities missed by not engaging in non-traditional partnerships that are not financially driven. The funding available remains modest, and the labs do not have a mandate for resource mobilization, thus encouraging strategic partnerships.

Through their exploration, the labs seek to leverage existing solutions to organize a portfolio of experimentation to tackle new or recurrent complex challenges. In the area of waste management, for instance, partnerships with local actors enabled identification of solutions to support better municipal waste management in India and United Republic of Tanzania. In Viet Nam, the accelerator lab has been experimenting with local actors on urban solid waste management.¹²⁷ Work on depopulation in Serbia has enabled exploration into the potential of digital nomads, generating new insights and potential entry points for policy-level interventions.¹²⁸

The accelerator lab constitutes an initial step for the renewal of UNDP engagement at country level through a 'learning by doing' approach that generates new ways of responding to development challenges. The sustainability of the change process induced by the accelerator labs will depend on many factors, but particularly on the extent to which labs can integrate within their country offices

¹²⁵ Based on 2020 budget and expenditure data, the average programme budget of accelerator labs is approximately \$280,000, with a range of \$120,000 to \$700,000.

¹²⁶ Von Hippel, Eric, 'Informal Innovation: It's Not A Bug, It's a Feature', Medium, August 2020. <https://acclabs.medium.com/informal-innovation-its-not-a-bug-it-s-a-feature-16834176cc7a>.

¹²⁷ UNDP, 'Launching Danang Circular Economy Hub for a Green and Sustainable City', November 2020. <https://www.vn.undp.org/content/vietnam/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/DaNangCircularEcoHub.html>.

¹²⁸ Nikolic, Kristina Jazinka, 'What Digital Nomads Have to Teach Us About Emigration', Medium, October 2020. <https://medium.com/@UNDPeurasia/what-digital-nomads-have-to-teach-us-about-emigration-60f34927ba74>.

and programmes while maintaining the space to explore. Participants in interviews for this evaluation highlighted the point that the initiative was generally valued by UNDP staff, including headquarters and country leadership. The accelerator lab network is expanding in 2020 with the launch of 30 additional labs, expanding the coverage to two thirds of UNDP's country level presence.

The unprecedented uncertainty and disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated UNDP's ability to respond quickly with innovative solutions, further strengthening the credibility of the labs, as confirmed by interviewees. Overall, the COVID-19 response has received a lot of attention from labs in all regions, particularly in Africa. The start of the pandemic coincided with the early stage of work at many labs and precipitated their response. As a result, as of July 2020, COVID-19 activities represented about a third of all experimentations reported by the accelerator labs. Here again the labs' capacity and flexibility have proved useful, permitting quick adaptation of existing initiatives and the rapid development of solutions to respond to emerging needs.

Finding 10. Measuring and scaling innovation — A wealth of innovations has surfaced, with great potential to transform UNDP's work. Nevertheless, UNDP's capacity to identify emerging innovations across its portfolios and support their growth and scaling is constrained by a limited appetite for risk, a lack of stakeholder support, inadequate financial resources, insufficient flexibility in rules and regulations, and shortcomings in monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management functions. The process for integrating successful techniques and tools and scaling them up into service offers is ad-hoc and not sufficiently institutionalized to respond to UNDP's decentralized nature.

The innovation targets and indicators in the Strategic Plan are of limited utility to track progress against intended results or to incentivize innovation.¹²⁹

There are two indicators for innovation being tracked using the project innovation marker: (a) the number of innovative tools and methodologies that are tested or piloted, and (b) the percentage of project outputs where innovative tools and methodologies are scaled, which tracks the degree of uptake of innovative approaches across the UNDP portfolio. While the innovation marker is a useful addition to the growing number of data markers, it has limitations in its value for decision-making: the absence of a clear focus and definition at the corporate level of how to define innovation and differentiate between experimentation and pilot projects, and the lack of quality assurance in the application of the marker. The type of project outputs marked as innovative show great variability, raising questions as to the utility of the marker, and there is a risk of over-reporting. ICPEs have served to triangulate countries that have over- and under-identified innovations in the marker.

However, the emphasis on quantity rather than quality in the indicators and marker often triggers a 'forced' compliance response, which may in turn promote over-reporting and may not be conducive to organizational objectives and learning. This has been a recurrent issue in UNDP, as highlighted in previous chapters and heavily documented in multiple evaluations¹³⁰ and audits. A strategy and measurement framework that frames the direction and intent of innovation is critical, not so much for accountability and reporting, but for enabling the identification of innovations and ensuring that dynamic feedback loops and systems are in place. This in turn supports promising experiments to transition to scale and, in particular, ensures that unnecessary failures are not replicated.¹³¹

Innovation emanates from various processes, both deliberate and not. The process of piloting and scaling up is not specific to the innovation process but is pursued more generally via traditional project approaches. Many UNDP projects are pilots, aimed for demonstration and testing with

¹²⁹ UNDP, 'Strategic Plan 2018–2021. IRRF Tier III Indicator Methodological Note', 2018.

¹³⁰ UNDP IEO, Office of Audit and Investigation, 'Joint Assessment of UNDP Institutional Effectiveness', 2017.

¹³¹ Ramalingan, Ben and Kirsten Bound, 'Innovation for International Development. Navigating the Paths and Pitfalls', Nesta, 2016.

the expectation that national governments will bring them to scale. Unfortunately, it is common practice for country programmes and projects to begin without being fully funded or adapted to reflect actual funding availability, which may limit the potential for success. The revised programme and project management guidance introduced various implementation modalities, but it does not distinguish pilots and experimentations from regular project implementation. In addition, UNDP's monitoring system does not permit exploration of the portfolio at a granular level. This would enable the identification of emerging innovative practices or replication in country-level operations, including their results and failures, which would support learning and adaptation.

In general, the scaling of results and innovation has been a challenge for UNDP. IEO evaluations often point to challenges in leveraging downstream work to influence the uptake and/or scale-up of its interventions due to such issues as funding constraints, stakeholder support and changes in context. While these constraints are outside the direct influence of UNDP, there is scope for it to strengthen its efforts to generate compelling evidence about the efficacy and sustainability of its interventions to support its advocacy efforts for scaling up.¹³²

Monitoring and evaluation functions tend to respond to project requirements for accountability in terms of adherence to agreed plans rather than with the goal of producing evidence about the merit of a solution, intervention model or approach. Experiments and pilots serve as demonstration cases to build confidence in the value of a model, approach or tool. UNDP's ability to measure the added value of its interventions should be seen in conjunction with its ability to influence the scaling up of its programmes and solutions. In general, evidence of rigorous measurement and impact

assessments remains scarce. It may not support effective decision-making regarding scaling up by UNDP and/or its capacity to convince its partners.

The launch of the accelerator labs did not include consideration for scaling up innovations. The scaling process is not supported by a specific protocol and thus it tends to follow a similar path as projects do, through uptake by national partners. Following the launch of the labs, a guide to develop scaling strategies was developed to support this effort in collaboration with Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.¹³³

Overall, there is evidence that some experiments are being scaled up over time, but this is more a result of reactive strategies to adapt and catch up with new requirements of the development agenda such as private sector engagement and digitalization. There is no corporate process for formally endorsing and scaling up innovative and best practices in ways that favour more rapid uptake across the organization. The exception is recent initiatives launched by the UNDP digital office to support the growth and scale-up of proven digital solutions.¹³⁴ While this is an important and positive step, this approach is not yet replicated in other programme areas.

For example, implementation of the accelerator lab initiative is an experiment in itself, in terms of management and execution. It could generate quick feedback that could be applied to broader organizational practices in terms of monitoring, knowledge management, network engagement, smart risk-taking, partnership building, resource mobilization, etc. However, the multiple levels of the learning process make for a complex and resource-intensive system for the global network of accelerator labs,¹³⁵ given the open framework and size of the network. It can be difficult to balance learning and adaptation for the implementation of the accelerator lab strategy and the learning

¹³² IEO, 'Evaluation of UNDP Support to Climate Change Adaptation', 2021.

¹³³ UNDP and SIPA, 'Strategy to Scale Innovation for Development', May 2020.

¹³⁴ In December 2020, the UNDP digital office launched 'Digital x', an accelerator programme aimed at growing and scaling up existing digital solutions based on open calls within the organization and providing financial and technical support for selected projects.

¹³⁵ The first annual report of the accelerator lab network recognized the need to reinvent knowledge management and monitoring and evaluation. UNDP, 'The Fast and the Curious. Our Story so Far', June 2020.

about what works and what doesn't, and in which contexts and circumstances.

Finding 11. Digital transformation — UNDP's digital strategy has emerged as an important and timely enabler of the Strategic Plan, contributing to innovation. Digital initiatives are increasingly taking shape, and their uptake gained speed in support of the COVID-19 response. This is helping to develop UNDP capabilities to meet growing demands in the digital development agenda.

At the start of the Strategic Plan, a digital readiness assessment was conducted as part of a review of the Bureau for Management Services. It found that, while UNDP performed better than its public sector peers, it significantly lagged behind digital leaders.¹³⁶ In response, UNDP adopted a digital strategy,¹³⁷ the first of its kind in the UN system,¹³⁸ and in 2019 it established a digital office.¹³⁹ This was supported by a revised information technology strategy to help UNDP transform itself to harness technologies for the achievement of the SDGs. This was accompanied by the launch of internal learning programmes to support staff digital capabilities and literacy. Over 1,600 staff members have completed a learning programme on digital transformation, and another 500 are participating in digital master classes.¹⁴⁰

In synergy with the Office of Information Management and Technology, the digital office is promoting participation across the organization in the digital transformation effort and supporting important aspects of the UNDP business model.

Through the digital governance group, 132 digital projects have been sponsored with a total projected cost of \$70 million. This will contribute to implementation of the information technology strategy as well as other initiatives from UNDP business units in the areas of business improvement, document management and programme work.

Two flagship initiatives launched by the digital office further illustrate how UNDP is promoting a new way of working with digitalization: the digital light house¹⁴¹ and the digital sprints.¹⁴² Across these two initiatives, 8 out of 13 projects developed are aligned with internal transformation pathways of the digital strategy and support enablers of the vision of the Strategic Plan promoting digital capabilities across the organization. Projects supported included the development of the SparkBlue platform, a digital platform for internal and external engagement;¹⁴³ the launch of a digital platform consolidating UNDP training on digital communication and collaboration;¹⁴⁴ and the consolidation of the GPN expert roster. Other initiatives in development through the digital sprints include the programme performance and learning platform, and a customer service-centric platform.

The digital strategy, while a coherent document, provides little mention of equity, human development and rights-based approaches. For instance, gender is absent in the document.

UNDP has a long record in the use of information and communication technologies, notably in the area

¹³⁶ BMS review, Section 5. https://undp.sharepoint.com/sites/ict_initiatives/Shared%20Documents/IT-Strategy-2020-2023_58179.pdf?search=digital%20solution%20survey.

¹³⁷ UNDP, 'Future Forward. UNDP Digital Strategy'. <https://digitalstrategy.undp.org/>. The digital strategy identifies two transformation pathways: an outward pathway to use digital technologies to improve the output/outcomes of UNDP contribution, and an internal pathway to improve the quality, relevance and efficiency of the UNDP business offering.

¹³⁸ https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2019/Digital_technologies_are_revolutionizing_global_development_UNDP_chief_says.html.

¹³⁹ Its service offer comprises advisory support, partnership building, access to expertise, knowledge sharing and scaling up support to UNDP business units.

¹⁴⁰ UNDP, 'Midterm Review of the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018–2021', 2020.

¹⁴¹ Launched in 2019, the digital lighthouse initiative consisted of sponsoring seven bureau-led digital initiatives with short-term time frames and aligned with the digital strategy.

¹⁴² Launched in 2020, the digital sprints engaged various UNDP offices and teams across bureaux in a programme aiming at starting up and scaling up six digital initiatives over a period of 12 months during which support is provided.

¹⁴³ See <https://www.sparkblue.org/>.

¹⁴⁴ See <https://digitalnow.undp.org/content/digitalnow/en/home.html>.

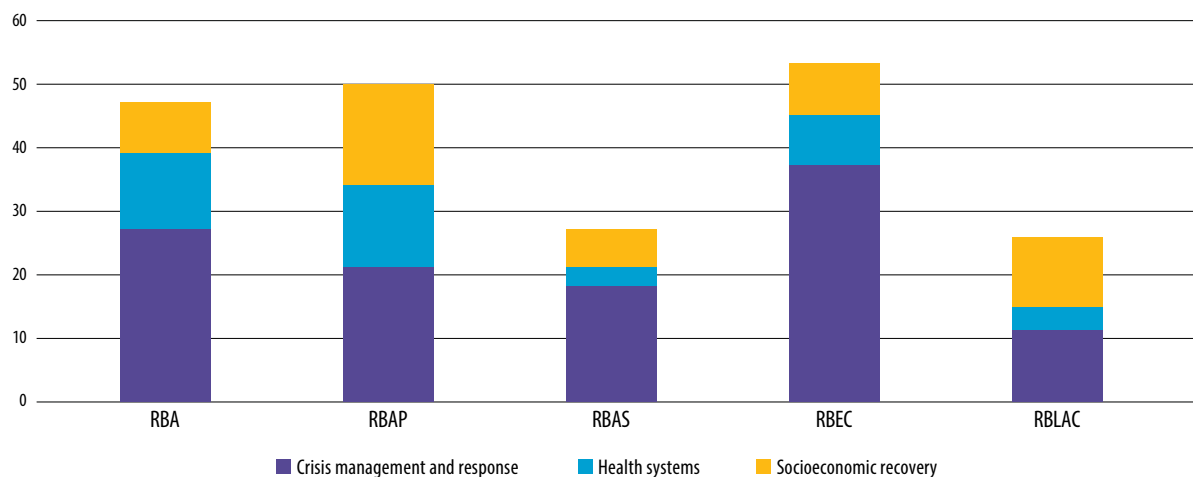
of e-governance and disaster risk reduction.¹⁴⁵ But these initiatives have remained ad-hoc and driven by country-level efforts without corporate follow-up or commitment. Other areas of exploration, building on previous pilots, have included development of service offers under the GPN in the areas of urbanization (smart cities) and digital governance and transformation.

In addition, UNDP's Singapore policy centre is driving a work agenda on sustainable and digital agriculture, sustainable finance and smart cities, and distinct lines of support are emerging to support country offices in these areas.¹⁴⁶ The accelerator labs are an important contributor to expanding the use of digital tools in data collection. While still under development, these efforts are timely in responding to new demands and opportunities in the digital development agenda, given UNDP's growing role in building digital capacity with the International Telecommunication Union. This was affirmed by the

Secretary-General's digital cooperation roadmap¹⁴⁷ and by UNDP's role co-chairing the high-level panel and technical secretariat on digital finance with United Nations Capital Development Fund.¹⁴⁸

UNDP's use and adoption of digital solutions is progressing, and the focus on data in UNDP work has increased. All regional bureaux have various projects at various levels of maturity, led by the regional bureau or country office, that make use of digital technology to facilitate data collection and service provision, and to use new sources of data to generate new insights. At global level, UNDP and the United Nations Environment Programme launched the UN biodiversity lab,¹⁴⁹ a data-driven collaborative platform aimed at improving access to and use of GIS data to monitor five of the Aichi biodiversity targets. This has brought together more than a dozen partners (from academia, national agencies and multilateral organizations) to collaborate and enable open access of GIS data.

FIGURE 15. COVID-19 digital solutions by region and response area



Source: Office of the Chief Digital Officer, COVID-19 digital solutions repository, accessed September 2020

¹⁴⁵ See 'IEO Reflections: Lessons from Evaluations: UNDP Support to Digitalization in Crisis Countries'.

¹⁴⁶ <https://sgtechcentre.undp.org/content/sgtechcentre/en/home/sustainable-agriculture1.html>.

¹⁴⁷ UN Digital Cooperation Roadmap. <https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/>.

¹⁴⁸ Digital Finance Taskforce. <https://digitalfinancingtaskforce.org/>.

¹⁴⁹ See <https://www.unbiodiversitylab.org/about.html>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an obvious context for accelerating digital transformation in UNDP. As of December 2020, over 250 digital solutions had been reported from over 80 country offices, about half of them focusing on response (Figure 15). About a third of the solutions covered two phases of the COVID support framework and 10 covered all three phases (prepare, respond, recover). Support related to COVID-19 accounted for more than half of all digital initiatives financed by the Digital Governance Group, including digitization efforts, development of web/mobile tools and platforms, and upgrading of systems, as well as more advanced initiatives such as automation of business processes. UNDP also extended support to partner governments to ensure business continuity of key government functions by adopting digital tools and providing hardware that enabled governments to operate remotely. This also included extending existing digital capabilities and supporting effective digital literacy.

Through its support to national governments, UNDP has a lead role in the socioeconomic recovery from the pandemic. It gained momentum in these efforts through the use of digital data approaches to support information-sharing and guide decision-making. At global level, UNDP launched the data futures platform, which pulls together socioeconomic data in a user-friendly manner.¹⁵⁰ UNDP has also been innovative at the country level in its use of online surveys and data collection tools across various mobile, internet and social media platforms to inform the development of SEIAs and SERPs. UNDP's regional responses and government support have also embraced digital solutions, including tracking, tracing and reporting of COVID-19 outbreaks as well as inventory monitoring for personal protective equipment. This has often lowered costs, brought more timely reporting and situation updates, and enhanced governments' ability to respond in a timely manner.¹⁵¹

5.2 Global and country support platforms

The Strategic Plan introduced global and country support platforms as delivery mechanisms to further the integration of UNDP's systems, services, knowledge and skills, and to strengthen the way UNDP manages and deploys its assets and capabilities. This section examines the extent to which the conceptualization, design and operationalization of global and country support platforms, as delivery mechanisms for the Strategic Plan, were sound and compatible with the UNDP business model and the needs of recipient countries, and the readiness and agility of UNDP's operational support infrastructure. It also assesses the extent to which these platforms have improved UNDP's programme offering and its development effectiveness and efficiency.

Finding 12. Global support platforms/Global Policy Network — The GPN represents an improvement over UNDP's previous policy support. It offers good potential to increase efficiencies in the deployment of expertise within the organization. There remains the need for a more coherent approach to capacity mapping, mobility and flexible contracting modalities. Also still needed are completion of the GPN infrastructure, dismantling of regional barriers and greater involvement of global policy centres, other UN agencies and research and academic institutions.

Anchored within UNDP's BPPS and the Crisis Bureau, the GPN is conceived as a network of experts and practitioners from within UNDP (and outside). It brings together policy and technical advisory expertise to develop and apply signature solutions across the three development contexts, drive innovation and work through the country support platforms and broader UNDP country operations.

Prior to the launch of the Strategic Plan, limited conceptualization of the GPN had taken place. Most of the conceptual work took place in 2018, and

¹⁵⁰ See <https://data.undp.org/>.

¹⁵¹ European Investment Bank, 'Africa's Digital Solutions to Tackle COVID-19', July 2020. https://www.eib.org/attachments/country/africa_s_digital_solutions_to_tackle_covid_19_en.pdf.

operationalization gained significant momentum at the end of 2019 with establishment of the Governance Board¹⁵² and adoption of the business plan, accompanied by an annual implementation plan. In addition to UNDP staff with programme and policy functions at headquarters, regional hubs and in country offices, the GPN infrastructure is also directly served and supported by a number of teams at headquarters and regional level. By virtue of the considerable number of senior staff involved and their well-defined roles and responsibilities, this governance structure is a significant improvement over previous versions of UNDP policy networks.

To respond to the range and variability of support demands across regions, the co-management of BPPS and Crisis Bureau support functions in the regional hubs has been strengthened.¹⁵³ A key challenge has been the range of expertise required by country offices, which is so wide that policy bureaux are unable to meet all the demand for support.¹⁵⁴ To pay for policy positions, headquarters and regional hubs resort to fundraising and direct project costing, creating parallel activities,¹⁵⁵ which from the perspective of some country offices are not always well integrated or aligned with the activities of country offices. Often, these projects' budgets are split into small amounts for each country, further contributing to the 'projectized' nature of UNDP operations. The ultimate consequence of this is a gap between what countries need and what country offices and bureaux can provide.

A structural challenge, which has now been partly resolved, has been the financing of policy expertise within the organization. Earlier, country offices had little flexibility to pay for expertise outside of their projects, impeding them from requesting

services that were not already budgeted; through the cost-recovery model, country offices had to pay for the expertise obtained from headquarters or regional hubs. The discontinuation of this practice has been a welcome step. Country offices can now receive support, paying only for experts' travel and subsistence costs, providing offices with more freedom in their use of corporate support, especially in programme development. However, the limited capacities of regional hubs due to staffing shortages remains a shortcoming for both the hubs and the country offices. Limited core budgets still preclude them from accessing support from the external market.

The exchange of internal expertise is facilitated by a database of staff profiles (DELVE profiles), which enables GPN members to locate experts within the organization. One drawback is that staff skills are not vetted by an external entity – staff profiles are based on self-reported information, which is not always reliable. To address the issue, BPPS and the Crisis Bureau, jointly with the Office of Human Resources (OHR), have initiated a mapping of policy and programme support capacities within the organization.

While the supply side has benefited from establishment of a number of instruments, the demand side has received less attention.¹⁵⁶ Currently, country offices' demand for expertise is assessed in a reactive fashion based on individual requests for support, primarily in areas where country offices have existing projects. It would be advantageous to have a systematic and thorough assessment of demand on a global scale, which could subsequently inform strategic decisions on what kind of expertise should be retained in house

¹⁵² Co-chaired by the directors of the two anchor bureaux, the GPN Governance Board also includes representation from the Executive Office and central and regional bureaux (deputy directors of regional bureaux and regional hub directors).

¹⁵³ BPPS/Crisis Bureau staff in regional hubs have dual lines of accountability: to the regional hub manager for servicing regional priorities and to the heads of global substantive teams.

¹⁵⁴ UNDP's Performance Audit noted 210 unfilled positions in BPPS and 36 unfilled positions in Crisis Bureau.

¹⁵⁵ With global and regional projects managed independently but serving countries where there are country offices.

¹⁵⁶ Understanding country offices' demand for expertise is an important aspect of UNDP's work. A concern expressed by several staff members is the insufficient amount of expertise in-house, which makes the organization heavily reliant on external consultants. This is a consequence of several factors. First, UNDP suffers from a significant shortage of policy positions in headquarters and the regional hubs. Second, UNDP's mandate is so broad that it is difficult for it to build depth across all areas where it works. One way of mitigating this challenge is by creating a good understanding of the general demand for expertise by the country offices and their national partners.

(and its affordability) and what type should be procured externally. Although some regional hubs have made headway in understanding regional demand through country office surveys, there has been no comprehensive and systematic assessment of needs at the corporate level.

The GPN's technical infrastructure is still not fully established, with several instruments yet to be operationalized and systematically used by staff. For example, STARS (System for Tracking Advisory Requests and Services), the platform to input and manage requests from country offices, is still not fully utilized. Launched in February 2020, STARS replaced a previous system (COSMOS) that failed to get enough traction among staff and was discontinued.¹⁵⁷ COSMOS failed not only because it was cumbersome to use, but also because of the lack of incentives for country offices to use it (including the cost-recovery disincentive).

In regions where UNDP hubs require country offices to file their requests through the system, STARS¹⁵⁸ is used more extensively, whereas in other regions many country offices continue to file their requests for support by email. STARS is still in its infancy, so it remains to be seen how successful it will be in attracting more users in the months and years ahead. There are also opportunities for building greater synergies and linkages between STARS and other systems in areas such as financial and project implementation management (Atlas) and human resource management (talent mapping).

The use of external expertise is facilitated by a unified corporate roster of external consultants established under the digital lighthouse initiatives. The move towards a unified roster is perceived positively within the organization. It has the potential to ensure greater consistency, quality, accessibility and efficiency in the deployment of

external experts, but there are still several unvetted active consultants, and staff managing them are unaware of the move towards a unified roster. Long-term agreements would benefit from a more strategic approach on how they could be pursued and forged at the global and country level. Further, such agreements are currently managed by different teams, depending on their substantive focus, which has created some degree of fragmentation and difficulty in locating and accessing them. There is no mechanism that connects and consolidates all existing agreements and facilitates country offices' access to them.

The exchange of knowledge, ideas and good practices across the GPN is carried out through the online communities of practice, which are facilitated by a digital platform (Spark Blue). Thematic facilitators manage the content, quality assurance, advice and feedback received.¹⁵⁹ Communities of practice were re-established in February 2019 and currently bring together more than 8,000 staff members. Eight global communities are already operational.¹⁶⁰ Country offices interviewed consider these communities useful for the exchange of knowledge and information, but the extent to which offices have practically benefited from them remains limited. A recent consultation in Spark Blue for the development of the next strategic plan has been very successful in attracting inputs from different sources, and it served to promote the Spark Blue platform.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the beginning of 2020 had an accelerating effect on the use of both communities of practice and the GPN. As of November 2020, 1,453 requests for support were lodged in STARS by over 140 country offices (over the eight months since the establishment of STARS),¹⁶¹ of which nearly 80 percent of services

¹⁵⁷ The challenges of COSMOS and the sunk cost that went with it were pointed out in UNDP's performance audit of programme support and policy advice by regional hubs.

¹⁵⁸ STARS stands for systematic tracking for accountability and results.

¹⁵⁹ A dedicated knowledge sub-team within the larger SDG integration team acts as the backbone of the communities of practice, delivering regular and systematic advisory services, quality assurance and support for facilitators, and development of guidance on best practices for community engagement.

¹⁶⁰ Six focused on the signature solutions, one focused on SDG integration and one on HIV and health.

¹⁶¹ Many of these requests were in the area of social protection and response to Covid-19.

had been delivered or were in the process of being delivered.¹⁶² In 2019, 95 country offices and units requested 828 deployments from the unified roster, of which 496 were completed (a rate of 60 percent). Through the end of November 2020, 118 country offices and units had made 720 requests for deployments from the unified roster.¹⁶³

The GPN is a significant improvement over previous versions of policy networks and enjoys wide support within the organization, according to staff members consulted and triangulated evidence. The GPN is structured more comprehensively and is supported by a more extensive institutional and technical infrastructure. However, for its potential to be realized, barriers to the deployment of expertise across UNDP regions have to be dismantled. While expertise within one region seems more easily transferrable through the GPN, the process is more challenging from one regional hub to a country office in another region. Little deployment of expertise has taken place across regions.

Further, the GPN infrastructure is currently not geared to capitalize on the expertise that resides in country offices. This is a missed opportunity, as most UNDP expertise resides in the country offices, inflexibly tied to specific projects and budgets. Some country offices have created centres of excellence in areas where they have comparative advantage,¹⁶⁴ and thus they have capabilities far superior to those of any regional hub. Yet, this expertise is largely immobile and inaccessible to other country offices, with rare exceptions. UNDP's global policy centres are another source of immense expertise, but they remain isolated from the GPN. There is limited coordination between policy centres and regional hubs, whereas country offices remain largely unaware of the capabilities

of policy centres and the support that could be available to them.

While attempts have been made to develop mechanisms by which the GPN would channel the expertise of other UN agencies, in practice there has been limited progress. This is a missed opportunity, given these agencies' immense expertise and knowledge and the strong complementarities to UNDP's work. In support of UNDP's integrator role, the GPN has yet to be tailored to foster greater inter-agency cooperation under the One UN approach. The expertise of development banks could be another potential target for the GPN.

Staff members' awareness of the GPN instruments remains limited, as evidenced by internal surveys¹⁶⁵ and by the fact that many staff members interviewed for this evaluation were unaware of the availability and utility of the various GPN components.¹⁶⁶ In addition, country offices have yet to be made aware of the incentives and advantages of using the GPN's various tools and features. Lastly, but most importantly, the Strategic Plan's results framework does not provide a definition of success or benchmarking indicators or targets against which the performance of the GPN can be measured.

Overall, given UNDP's decentralized nature, with expertise scattered across the globe, the GPN is well positioned to play an integrative role by leveraging all of UNDP's policy and programme support functions. This is true regardless of whether they are located at headquarters or in global policy centres, regional hubs or country offices, or independently of duty station and host bureau.

Finding 13. Country support platforms — CSPs are valued for their potential to spur innovation and

¹⁶² STARS service requests in 'assigned', 'delivery in progress' and/or 'completed' status.

¹⁶³ Crisis Bureau deployment dashboard. <https://dashboard-crd.undp.org/#/views/CBDTSDashboard/Overview?iid=1>.

¹⁶⁴ For example, Ukraine in public procurement, the Philippines in disaster risk management.

¹⁶⁵ The latest partnership survey conducted by UNDP revealed that 51 percent of partners overall are not clear about GPN, and 27 percent of them have never heard of it. As for government stakeholders, 48 percent are unclear, and 25 percent have never heard of it. The situation is worse with donors: 60 percent remain unclear and 37 percent have never heard of GPN.

¹⁶⁶ Although many staff are already using some of these tools (i.e. communities of practice), there is a need to inform staff members and stakeholders more systematically about them. For example, some staff members interviewed for this evaluation were not familiar with the GPN concept. Others were confused about specific GPN components, such as the rosters. Few staff members seem to be aware of the fact that UNDP has moved towards a one-roster system at the global level.

integration at country level. These platforms have created space for multi-stakeholder engagement and experimentation. Insufficient attention has been paid to ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of platforms, as well as the measurement of their performance and results. The roll-out of CSPs has lacked a strong business plan and conceptual framework, with limited guidance and practical support for country offices.

UNDP conceptualized the CSPs as an instrument for country offices to craft country- and context-specific solutions to complex and multidimensional challenges by bringing together multiple stakeholders. Similar platforms had been operational in certain country offices well before the unveiling of the current Strategic Plan. But the process for their establishment gained particular momentum in 2020 when headquarters conducted an assessment of country experiences with the establishment of CSPs in the framework of the midterm review of the Strategic Plan. Based on the results of the assessment, UNDP has strengthened the CSPs' conceptual framework by developing criteria for defining and assessing them. The criteria focus on features such as network solutions, wide participation, discovery through learning by doing, sustainable and scalable models, and leaving no one behind.

However, the roll-out of the CSPs as envisioned in the Strategic Plan lacked a clear business plan and conceptual framework, and there was limited guidance on their design and conceptualization. Interviews with country offices confirm that the subsequent instructions provided by headquarters on their operationalization have been insufficient. There has also been a lack of practical support for country offices in establishing their CSPs. This is a reflection of insufficient capacities at headquarters and regional hubs to provide more substantive hands-on support.¹⁶⁷

These challenges have contributed to a sense of uncertainty within the organization about what exactly the CSPs are and how to go about establishing

them. Interviews for this evaluation showed different levels of understanding of the CSP concept, an indication of the lack of a clear and shared definition and insufficient guidance by headquarters. The lack of awareness was corroborated by UNDP's partnership survey. In addition, the Strategic Plan midterm review noted that "UNDP needs to clarify the core components and the implementation process" for the CSP approach.

There is a tension between CSPs' aspiration for integration on one hand, and on the other UNDP's compartmentalized structure at country level, resulting from its donor-driven and project funding model. Establishing integrated, multidimensional and multi-stakeholder platforms is challenging when operations are predominantly based on small-scale, pre-defined, donor-funded projects with short time frames. This hampers long-term planning and sustained engagement, making it difficult to undertake integrated, experimental and open-ended initiatives. Funding platforms through UNDP core resources eases these restrictions, but core financing is insufficient to sustain a larger number of platforms and for longer periods of time.

While many of these CSP initiatives have demonstrative value or generate impact on a small group or few locations, they often struggle to effectuate change on a larger scale. This requires continued engagement and funding over a longer time from both UNDP and national partners. This brings to the fore the importance of a well-integrated country programme into which the platforms are embedded.

CSPs are associated with novel positive concepts and approaches such as accelerators, labs, open platform structures and integration engines, but they also involve risks. First, these concepts are not clearly defined, nor are they placed clearly in the context of what is needed and feasible at the country level. Further, the CSPs' focus on experimental and novel approaches needs to be balanced with the level of acceptance for novelties

¹⁶⁷ This was also noted by the Strategic Plan's midterm evaluation, which highlighted that "while the early adopters have advanced this new way of working, not enough organizational support is being provided and new supporting systems need to be established".

and capacity for absorption at the country level. They require a shift in mindset within UNDP staff and acceptance from national partners, especially governments — both of which require time to take root. Some of these ideas are quite novel for many government departments, which operate on traditional approaches and are organized along sectoral and departmental lines.

The establishment of CSPs has received limited support from the regional hubs and global policy centres.¹⁶⁸ This reflects not only the lack of a strong strategic approach to the establishment of these platforms but also a missed opportunity, as these structures could provide important contributions to the process. Also, the engagement of UN agencies through the CSPs has been limited thus far, as confirmed by interviews and the midterm review. Although some steps have been taken to meaningfully engage UN agencies in the process,¹⁶⁹ the concept of CSPs remains poorly understood by the agencies and lacks their full buy-in.¹⁷⁰

A key challenge that deserves greater attention is the CSPs' interaction with the GPN. Although designed to contribute to similar objectives — in particular, integration of programme delivery — there are very few direct linkages between the two. Interviews with CSP-related staff indicated that they make limited use of the GPN; many were unaware of its existence. Given that one purpose of the country platforms is to integrate service delivery and knowledge management at the country level, there would be advantages to linking them more effectively to the global system for integrating service delivery and knowledge management. For example, some of the GPN tools could be repurposed more specifically to serve the needs of the CSPs.

Providing a definitive account of the results achieved through the CSPs on a global scale is difficult, as the country offices' reporting on CSPs¹⁷¹ is still weak and hampered by the lack of a clear definition of country platforms. In addition, there are no robust measures related to CSPs at the corporate level,¹⁷² as measurement and reporting is focused primarily on inputs and processes.

Platform-like initiatives are positive particularly in the way they can mobilize a large and diverse group of stakeholders around a problem, potentially bringing multiple dimensions to achieve solutions. What they share is an openness to participation and the adoption of experimental and potentially innovative approaches to solving development problems. IEO analysis of 21 CSPs¹⁷³ identified two common features shared by most platforms. One is the creation of a space for multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration to solve public policy problems, and in particular the involvement of non-traditional actors from outside the government. The other is the search for an innovative solution through an experimental and learning-by-doing process. The main areas where platform activities have concentrated are the identification of specific solutions to local climate change and environmental problems or local development and governance challenges. In their annual reporting, several country offices have also reported country platforms targeted at promoting the adoption and nationalization of SDGs, an area where multi-stakeholder engagement is crucial.

CSPs' main results have occurred in specific areas where their activities have been focused, especially at the local level. For example, Serbia's platform has generated tangible solutions to local-level environmental problems such as real-time weather

¹⁶⁸ An exception to this is the Bangkok Regional Innovation Centre, which has been more actively involved in the establishment of CSPs in the Asia and Pacific region.

¹⁶⁹ Consultations with UN agencies were conducted in July 2018 in Geneva and New York.

¹⁷⁰ For example, UNDP's partnership survey revealed that about 56 percent of UN agencies were unclear about the CSPs and nearly 30 percent had never heard of them.

¹⁷¹ As part of UNDP's ROAR reporting process.

¹⁷² While the relevant Strategic Plan IRRF indicator focuses on the number and percent of CSPs, it does not define success from a results perspective.

¹⁷³ Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Cabo Verde, China, Colombia, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Moldova, Philippines, Serbia, Suriname and Uzbekistan.

data, wind-powered farming, smart parking and lighting services. In Cabo Verde, communities have prepared and are implementing development plans in line with the national SDGs. In Moldova, the ‘big data platform’ has generated data on citizen mobility, public transportation infrastructure and other indicators in the Chisinau municipality. North Macedonia’s City of Skopje Innovation Lab has brought together city administration, citizens, the private sector, NGOs and academia to design solutions to air pollution. These are encouraging initiatives, but it is premature to talk about any transformative impact of the CSPs at country level because they are relatively new, and their experimental process takes time to yield tangible results.

The CSP infrastructure lacks an effective monitoring system at the corporate level, which should include data across countries and a focus on the particularities of the CSP model. The experimentation and innovation that the CSPs entail is useful in creating solutions to complex development problems, but it requires a clear results framework. Currently, country offices have limited capacity to identify results produced by the CSPs in clearly measurable terms, which hinders their ability to make rapid adjustments when needed. A key observation is that country offices have yet to focus these platforms more clearly on results, not just processes. Ultimately, CSPs should be the means to an end, rather than an end in themselves.

Sustainability is another important aspect of the CSPs that requires more attention. As noted in several ICPEs, sometimes initiatives are not adequately institutionalized, remaining dependent on donors’ project funds after years of support. Sometimes they operate as parallel structures to the national institutional framework. CSPs run a higher risk of this due to their multi-stakeholder and open nature, which makes national ownership potentially more challenging. Overall, country offices lack

solid CSP sustainability plans, which are needed to ensure that these structures get fully incorporated into the broader national institutional framework.

5.3 Management and capabilities

This section assesses how UNDP is managing its assets, capabilities, finances and operational service arrangements as the operational backbone¹⁷⁴ for the resident coordinator system and UN agencies. It also reviews to what extent changes put in motion with the Strategic Plan are making the organization more nimble, innovative and effective.

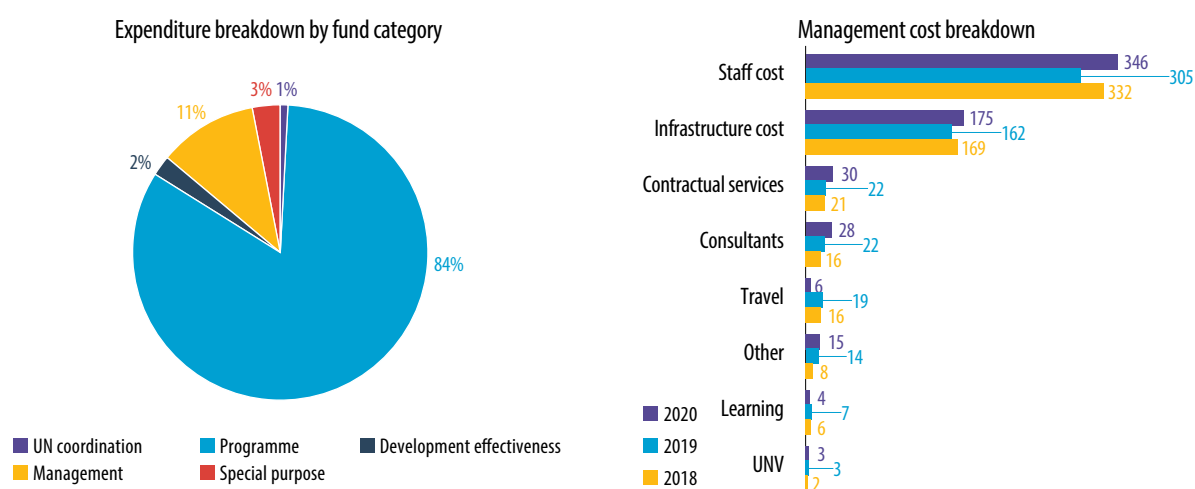
Finding 14. Management and UNDS operational backbone — Measures put in place during this strategic plan period have helped to reduce UNDP management costs, balance the budget, streamline processes and procedures, improve client orientation and reduce the carbon footprint of UNDP’s global operations. In addition, changes made possible by harnessing new technologies and rethinking capabilities for business effectiveness and efficiency have advanced means for UNDP to improve its agility, flexibility and client satisfaction.

Management costs have been reduced on average. During this strategic plan period, average management costs fell from \$637 million to \$577 million annually, or from 12 percent to 11 percent of total expenditure as compared to the last Strategic Plan. A greater percentage of resources is now dedicated to programming, which is positive (Figure 16). While staff costs fell considerably in 2019 due to vacant posts,¹⁷⁵ staff-related spending has grown in 2020. There has also been an increase of over 30 percent in spending on consultant and contractual services in 2020.

¹⁷⁴ UNDP provides common services in finance to 94 percent of UNCTs, human resources to 93 percent, administrative and procurement support to 90 percent, ICT to 89 percent and logistics services to 83 percent.

¹⁷⁵ As part of the strategy to reduce the deficit and bring about a balanced budget without laying off staff. UNDP, ‘Midterm Review of the Integrated Resources Plan and Integrated Budget, 2018-2021’, June 2020.

FIGURE 16. Expenditure breakdown by fund category and management cost, 2018–2020

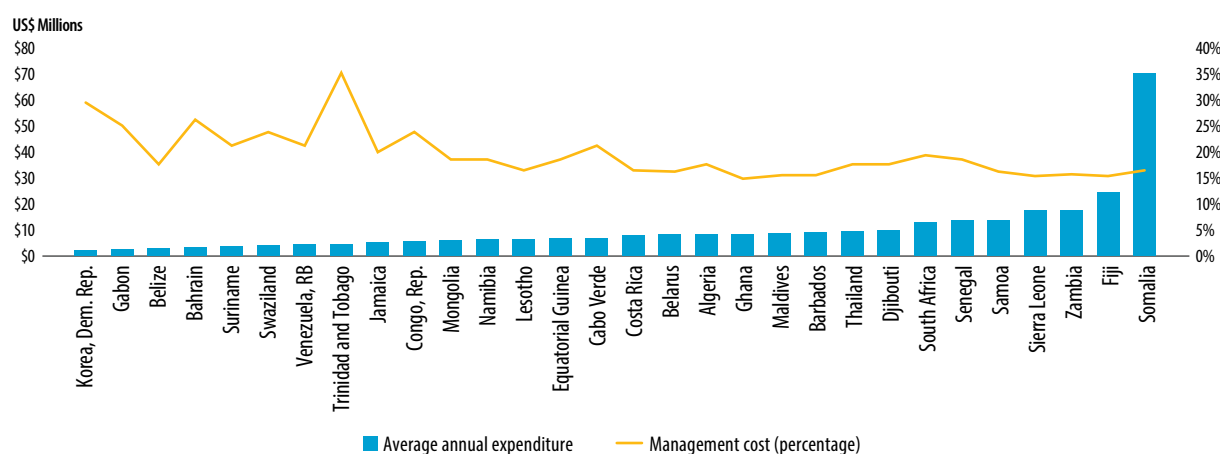


Source: Institutional data¹⁷⁶ from Atlas (extracted February 2021), programme data from BPPS and BMS

Sixty-one country offices still had management costs higher than 10 percent, and 30 country offices had management costs higher than 15 percent of their total expenditure (Figure 17). Management costs are lower for country offices with larger portfolios,

which benefit from economies of scale.¹⁷⁷ There is a large differential in proportion of management costs in offices with small portfolios, which needs to be further investigated. It is not the case that lower is always better, but it does deserve further analysis.

FIGURE 17. Countries with high management costs relative to average annual expenditure, 2018–2020



Note: High management costs is defined as 15% and above.

Source: Institutional data from Atlas (extracted February 2021), programme data for calculating average annual expenditure from BPPS and BMS

¹⁷⁶ IEO analysis of institutional data (all data except programming) includes data excluded from BMS reporting such as on expenditure related to UN Volunteers, UN Capital Development Fund, Development Coordination Office and United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, development effectiveness expenditure outside the biennial budget and funds for special operation of the Office of the United Nations Security Coordinator and some common services.

¹⁷⁷ Average annual expenditure over \$25 million, a total of 46 countries.

Streamlining of processes and procedures has improved business efficiency. By 2020,¹⁷⁸ with additional programme and policy guidance, over 150 business processes had been improved across procurement, human resources, finance, information technology, general services and administration. In addition, to unify a range of corporate services and processes, a single services portal to support staff, offices and partners was launched worldwide. A new customer-focused service portal has been deployed, with a digital interface that improves ease of use and has the ability to track requests and collect performance and quality data.¹⁷⁹

UNDP was particularly swift to adjust many of its business services, systems and procedures in response to COVID-19. UNDP swiftly put into practice measures that supported staff in working from home and adjusted operational processes, especially for procurement and recruitment, initially for the interim stage of the pandemic, but later extended. Despite evidence and recognition of streamlining of processes and procedures, in interviews and desk review of IEO evaluations country offices and partners continued to highlight concerns about UNDP's efficiency, effectiveness, nimbleness and flexibility, and the need for further streamlining and changes to operational policies, processes and procedures.

Budget reform helped UNDP balance its budget after years in deficit, freeing up funds for investments, especially in innovation. When the Administrator started his mandate in 2017, there was a projected deficit in the institutional budget. To protect UNDP's extra-budgetary reserves, which had been severely depleted in the previous years, managers were asked to look for ways to reduce non-staff expenditures. This included re-examining every position to be advertised and keeping some posts vacant.

Consulted staff credit the success of the budget reform to incentives that reward performance of budget centres in income generation and prudent

spending. Since 2018 country offices can keep a portion of the positive balance of revenue over expenditure for investment in their countries instead of returning it to headquarters. The resource allocation model introduced in 2018 also takes into account the different types of funding streams and built-in incentives for country offices to avoid waivers on the general management support cost-recovery rate, which increases allocated resources for the next project cycle. It also requires the budget amount to be re-examined and reduced if delivery was not achieved. These changes also eliminated 'gaming' of the system. This resulted in greater fiscal responsibility and less budget variance.

More emphasis was placed on vacancy management and travel management as well, by cutting back on office space and incentivizing all business units to spend in a more thoughtful and rigorous way. These reforms have particularly increased transparency in budget allocation. One issue that was not addressed is the continued emphasis on oversight of financial delivery rates by offices and bureaux. As found in some ICPEs, additional focus is needed on programmatic oversight to ensure the delivery of effective and sustainable results, not just good financial delivery.

Greening UNDP operations is one clear way UNDP contributes to the SDGs with improved organizational efficiency. Launched in 2019, the greening moonshot initiative and the moonshot facility aim to reduce UNDP's greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent by 2025 and 50 percent by 2030. While greening operations are still at an early phase, UNDP has developed an environmental management tool to assess the carbon footprint of its global operations. The evaluation team could not validate this information, but UNDP states that energy monitoring devices have been installed in 108 offices. It has been reported that the footprint of information technology hardware has been reduced by 75 percent through the adoption of

¹⁷⁸ UNDP, 'UNDP's Business Model: A Progress Update', presentation, January 2020.

¹⁷⁹ UNDP, 'Customer-centric Service Portal', Intranet. https://undp.sharepoint.com/sites/ict_initiatives/SitePages/UNall-Service-Portal.aspx.

cloud-computing and compact energy. Between the moonshot facility, RBAP and RBAS regional greening funds, and co-funding from RBLAC and RBEC, 34 projects were selected for funding in 2020 with an overall investment of \$2.22 million. With an average payback period of 5.96 years, moonshot projects are expected to save \$420,000 per year in energy use.¹⁸⁰

Harnessing technology has grown as a tool to innovate and improve efficiency and effectiveness as part of a wave of digital transformation. UNDP launched a digital strategy and an information technology strategy in 2020 (see Finding 11). Response to the COVID-19 emergency has particularly opened opportunities for UNDP to evolve and accelerate the implementation of the information technology and digital strategies. In addition, UNDP is replacing the Atlas system with Oracle Cloud enterprise resource planning. The new system is estimated to cost \$20 million over three years (2020–2022), but it provides an opportunity to reduce the system's operating costs by \$1.8 million per annum.¹⁸¹

Clustering of operational services into the Global Shared Service Unit (GSSU) is an ongoing change to UNDP's business model. It started in the previous Strategic Plan, but only during the current one was a comprehensive business case put in place, along with more effective oversight by the Executive Office. This takes into consideration lessons learned from an initial piloting phase in RBAP, the Office of Audit and Investigation audit and IEO evaluation of inter-agency operational services.¹⁸² The business case for clustering proposed a simultaneous and cross-functional roll-out of human resources, procurement and finance functions, to "allow for end-to-end process optimization... also free up enough capacity in country offices so that full positions can be repurposed rather than resulting

in capacity fragmentation."¹⁸³ Notwithstanding the risks set out in the business case, step-by-step implementation is now envisaged rather than simultaneous and cross-functional as had been recommended.

The clustering process was rolled out to all countries by end October 2020, and 57 country offices are consolidating office processes in finance, human resources and procurement. However, the process is still much delayed and poorly communicated. The clustering business case proposed completion of the clustering process by the end of 2020, but it had to be extended to 2021.¹⁸⁴ The global shared services project status update of May 2020 cited COVID-19 as the cause of delays,¹⁸⁵ but interviews indicate there were concerns about inadequate resources for the financial, technical and technological components to ensure the timely and effective progress of clustering of operational services.

The proposals to cluster procurement functions had been put on hold by BMS pending the outcome of a fundamental review of the area, which was likely to result in centralizing certain classes of acquisition. The procurement review is complete, and preparatory work for clustering is now under way to ensure completion in 2021. While procurement clustering was on hold, clustering of finance services began in October 2019 and of human resources services in May 2020.

Buy-in for clustering of operational services has improved but continues to be a challenge. Internal messaging remains a significant issue affecting buy-in. Despite several communication efforts and training sessions, in some regional bureaux and country offices many staff still see clustering as a threat, potentially leading to job losses rather than efficiencies. The concern remains that there has been insufficient discussion and information sharing

¹⁸⁰ UNDP, 'Greening UNDP Operations' (intranet).

¹⁸¹ Action memorandum dated 29 May 2020.

¹⁸² UNDP IEO, 'Evaluation of Inter-agency Operational Services', 2018.

¹⁸³ UNDP, 'Clustering Business Case, Submission to the EG', p. 4, last update: 11 May 2019.

¹⁸⁴ UNDP, 'Global Shared Services Project – Project Document and Implementation Plan', March 2020.

¹⁸⁵ The update cited specific COVID-19 consequences: "Country offices prioritized focus on COVID-19; inability to hold face-to-face workshops and training sessions due to limited travel; and widespread teleworking arrangements".

on the benefits of clustering and opportunities for repurposing existing staff in other programme roles.

The administrative functions of some staff in country offices and regional bureaux will be centralized in the GSSU, and the decision has been made to repurpose these staff to support programme delivery. While this may help to maintain staff morale and reduce opposition to clustering, it raises concerns that UNDP may be retaining staff whose skills and experience are not suited to their new roles. In trying to address this issue, a staff transition plan has been developed by OHR to assist regional bureaux and country office senior managers in the design and management of their new country office structures. It includes guidance on re-distribution of roles, accountabilities and resource management practices. A road map is being developed on how to reassign staff for new roles through the learning and development programme, along with guidelines on handling transitions out of the organization (separations, early retirement, etc.) where necessary. An online tool was developed to collect country office staff data. Data on cost savings from clustering remain uncertain. A March 2020 revised cost-benefit analysis indicated a potential cost-avoidance of \$33 million per annum.

As operational backbone for the UNDS and other partners, UNDP had a significant role over the period of the Strategic Plan, while it also recalibrated itself in terms of structures and processes due to the delinking. Since delinking, UNDP has been providing a full array of all-inclusive operational services to 131 resident coordinator offices and three regional offices. The UN Board of Auditors recognized that the reform was a highly complex process that affected UNDP disproportionately due to its previous role as the host and manager of the UNDS coordination function, and given the related legal, financial and human resource matters involved. It noted UNDP's strong commitment and engagement in all the inter-agency workstreams

related to the UNDS reform, with a completion rate of 97.8 percent of the myriad of administrative steps required by the delinking.

Taking into consideration recommendations from IEO evaluations and other studies and surveys¹⁸⁶ to improve client satisfaction, a service excellence project was launched to improve customer focus, feedback mechanisms, streamlining services and methodology as well as cost transparency and charging for services.¹⁸⁷ Progress has been made in creating a user-centric service management platform (ServiceNow), which will be fully functional in 2021. In addition, the GSSU has established key performance indicators for its services, and BMS has conducted a survey for client feedback.

Since the roll-out of the resident coordinator service portal in June 2019, it has received 33,000 online requests and has a current completion rate of 77 percent. Quality assurance tools have been incorporated to monitor turn-around time and client satisfaction, which currently stands at an average of 4.18 out of 5 stars. In addition to receiving feedback on performance, the GSSU has established a new strategic performance and client management service unit. It has four areas of focus: Oversight of performance of the GSSU; client (country office and agency) management; help desk support (contact centres); and service quality assurance. As part of the assessment of UNDP's service provision to the resident coordinator system, a joint UNDP-Development Coordination Office global survey was conducted to solicit feedback from both clients and service providers. With a 90 percent response rate from UNDP and resident coordinator offices across 131 countries and 3 regional offices, 73 percent of respondents rated UNDP services either satisfactory or very satisfactory.

Finding 15. People management and capabilities
— UNDP has launched comprehensive strategies for people management and learning and development to address challenges identified and support

¹⁸⁶ In 2019, a customer-centric platform survey was launched to better understand country office customer experience. IEO requested survey results from BMS but was informed that these data are unavailable because a third party conducted the survey.

¹⁸⁷ UNDP, 'Customer Centricity, UNDP Management Services', 2019.

capabilities and human resources management. The strategies lacked attention to targeted technical capabilities' development specifically in programme areas and did not adequately consider monitoring and evaluation measures to assess the learning and capacity developed and in use.

The People for 2030 strategy, launched in 2019, articulates a clear rationale to address human resource challenges faced by the organization. Challenges include levels of performance and accountability; performance culture, to recognize and reward commitment and excellence while providing meaningful consequences for poor performance or behaviour; quality of people management and leadership; tools and policies that are fit for purpose; workforce and succession planning to support strategic deployment; ability to attract and select top talent; use of people analytics to enhance human resource effectiveness and efficiency; targeted learning and development; contemporary and flexible career paths; and fostering and leveraging diversity.¹⁸⁸ Shared accountability among individuals, managers, OHR and the organization is a key new aspect of the strategy.¹⁸⁹

People for 2030 is ambitious in its attempt to deliver such a significant change in mindset in a three-year period. According to UNDP, the policy commitments are on track. So far, changes have been made to policies to streamline the process and strengthen accountability for performance and performance management. A new intra-bureau people development strategy was completed in 2020. An annual rotation exercise for country leadership has been launched and major investment made in training the new cohort of country office leaders. The UNDP United Nations Volunteers talent programme won an award for innovation in recruitment. A revised internship policy with stipends was approved. UNDP has increased its efforts to foster and leverage diversity and introduced new measures to combat racism and discrimination. A first set of policy changes

was adopted aiming to make UNDP more family friendly, with parental leaves.

As part of the disability inclusion agenda, UNDP has ensured that its job website and related recruitment tools are fully accessible. More emphasis has been placed on employing people with disability. Efforts are being made to improve access to workplaces and tools, and a talent programme. UNDP has also sought to reduce barriers to inclusion of people with disability by issuing guidance on reasonable accommodation. Overall, these initiatives are very basic; offices are encouraged but not mandated to implement them. Funds were released to make workplaces more accessible, but no information is available on the results.

While good progress has been made in implementing the People for 2030 strategy, it is early to assess qualitative results. The organization has yet to make new tools fully functional and more clearly identify risks and mitigation strategies to ensure the full success of this ambitious strategy.

The people development strategy, launched in 2020 to accompany People for 2030, proposes a structured learning and development offering. This is the first time UNDP has had an organization-wide people development strategy. UNDP's Strategic Plan acknowledges that staff capacity must evolve to deliver results.¹⁹⁰ Therefore, the people development strategy aims at systematically addressing how to provide opportunities for staff members to improve capabilities to support governments and partners to achieve the SDGs.

Partnerships with universities, consulting groups and other content providers have allowed high-quality content to be offered quickly and conveniently. OHR has partnered with organizations such as LinkedIn Learning, Coursera and IESE Business School for accessible continuous learning and off-the-shelf content, particularly in the fields of managerial, leadership, career and inter-personal skills.

¹⁸⁸ UNDP, 'People for 2030, United Nations Development Programme People Strategy (2019–2021)' 2019.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ UNDP, 'UNDP Strategic Plan 2018–2021', 2017.

A people development governance group has been established to ensure the effectiveness of learning and development. However, the lack of customization to the UNDP context has been a drawback. Also missing is an evaluation plan to rigorously assess UNDP's learning and development offering, needed to determine its effectiveness, efficiency, impact and value for money. The majority of programmes offered are only assessed at a superficial level, if at all, mainly by gauging participants' satisfaction with the training. There has been inconsistent evidence of completion or satisfaction rates for many of the programmes. Little effort has been made to assess whether the content covered was learned and whether the learned content has had an impact and the investment has paid off. UNDP's learning and development strategy ranks low in the commonly used Phillip's model¹⁹¹ that evaluates the five levels of learning (see Annex 1 for methodological note).

Most concerning is the fact that learning and development offerings do not address the need for technical capabilities in programme areas. UNDP's Strategic Plan committed to broadening partnerships with training providers to increase access to open online courses for specific thematic and technical areas, but that has not taken place yet.¹⁹² The GPN has created some programme-related courses that are available on the UNDP learning management system, but they are mostly outdated.¹⁹³ Investment has also been made in improving digital expertise. As with the other courses, however, there is no evidence of rigorous evaluation.

OHR leadership now has more of a seat at the decision-making table than in the past. The director of OHR reports to the director of BMS with a dotted line to the Administrator. The enhanced measures proposed in the People for 2030 and people development strategies signal that OHR has become more influential. However, it is still not evident that OHR is adequately positioned to

contribute to strategic and budgetary decisions. Its leadership contributes to resource planning and allocation processes as part of BMS, but this is insufficient and not always timely. OHR leadership joined the Organizational Performance Group but now only participates when invited. Thus, the organization may not always ensure that people issues are considered when making decisions.

UNDP's Annual Report 2019 states that "People come first at UNDP". In reflection of that, the people function needs to play a more strategic role at the highest level. Participation at least with the Organizational Performance Group is key for OHR to obtain adequate resources and authority to deliver on strategies that can improve staff capabilities, reward good performance, be results focused and foster a culture of innovation within the organization to achieve the SDGs.

Finding 16. Organizational culture — UNDP's nimbleness, flexibility and innovation are impeded by a risk-averse organizational culture. The tendency towards conflict avoidance means that poor performance or behaviour are not consistently reported or addressed, hindering learning and opportunities to improve results.

The risk-averse organizational culture of UNDP is a key management issue that affects UNDP's flexibility, effectiveness, innovation, learning and opportunities to improve and accelerate achievement of results. Analysis of risk logs and interviews indicates that fear of negative audits and financial risks tend to outweigh concerns about reputational and operational risks of inaction. It is an issue closely connected to administrative and legal bottlenecks. Innovation, organizational learning and performance are particularly affected by this risk-averse and conflict-avoidant organizational culture.

UNDP's enterprise risk management policy was updated in 2019 to renew UNDP's commitment to risk management. The updated policy and

¹⁹¹ Best practice in evaluation of learning is Phillips' 5 levels of evaluation. Jack J. Phillips and Patricia Pulliam Phillips, 'Handbook of Training Evaluation and Measurement Methods', Routledge, 19 May 2016.

¹⁹² UNDP, 'UNDP Strategic Plan 2018–2021', 2017.

¹⁹³ UNDP OHR, 'TDC Course Data v1, spreadsheet from Learning Management System', undated.

associated action plan aimed to build a mature risk culture and competencies with emphasis on shifting behaviours and mindsets. Since its launch, UNDP has invested in capacity building, trainings and webinars targeting all regions and personnel. An enterprise risk management toolkit was made available to all personnel. It contains the latest information on UNDP's risk management approach, risk governance mechanisms, guidance and tools, training opportunities and materials, and communication products. Two risk management dashboards (at programme and project levels) were launched to present an aggregate view of risks (a risk 'heat map'), allowing information to be filtered at the regional or programme level. This aims to enable managers and risk owners to map risks to improve monitoring and risk-informed decision-making.

Despite efforts — including encouraging discourse among top leaders, financial investment to stimulate innovation, the new enterprise risk management policy and the streamlining of corporate policies — UNDP's organizational culture still lacks the flexibility the organization needs to deliver more timely and innovative results and to partner with non-traditional partners, especially the private sector. The overall impression of stakeholders interviewed is still that the organization is bureaucratic and risk-averse, and that there are opportunities to make the organization nimbler.

It is important to note that risk aversion is in the nature of most international organizations. It is difficult to assert that UNDP is more or less risk-prone or risk-averse than other UN agencies or international financial institutions, for example. It might never systematically take risks like the private sector. But UNDP's mindset, policies and procedures will need to evolve if it is to become more innovative and fulfil its goal of expanding partnerships with the private sector. A first step is for the organization to develop a corporate risk appetite statement, which is now taking place.

The role of the Legal Office was often raised in interviews as both the solution and the problem, critical to promoting sound risk-taking but also challenging to evolve with necessary changes.

Consultations indicated a tendency for the Legal Office to be consulted rather late in the development process, at which point it was seen as being conservative and unhelpful for pointing out problems and constraints. Instead the Legal Office should be encouraged to play a timely, constructive role in designing solutions that meet the organization's needs within acceptable legal risks.

UNDP documents also indicate a culture that is generally still not willing and able to learn from failure. Despite efforts to collect data in the ROARs about challenges, public reports rarely highlight failures. It is not very evident how lessons are being learned and used to correct course and generate improvements. This is also evident in the Administrator's report, built on ROAR data, which mainly highlights a positive assessment, including achievement of nearly all targets.

This risk-averse culture has also resulted in conflict avoidance, affecting performance management. Recent ICPEs confirm that ratings in global staff surveys have not improved. A significant number of staff disagree that appropriate action is taken at their office if there is a performance issue, and many do not feel they can take a chance on an idea; failure is not often seen as an opportunity to learn.

Information from interviews and ICPE meta-synthesis indicate that avoiding managing poor performance has seriously negative consequences. Senior managers spoke of feeling disempowered to address performance issues and of the disconnect between a results focus and poor performance/behaviours. Some interviewees provided evidence of complaints made about the performance and/or behaviour of personnel by partners, donors or governments, yet managers lacked the confidence to address the issues because they had not been supported by UNDP leadership to deal with the staff members in question.

The reasons for this situation are complex, cultural and sometimes context related. Information from interviews and the ICPE meta-synthesis indicates that in some country offices, certain staff members are considered 'protected' because of their ties with government or local power brokers.

People for 2030 acknowledges the challenging state of performance management in UNDP. In 2019, OHR introduced changes to the performance management and development policy, the resident representative terms of reference and a large number of training courses dealing with people management skills to support the required culture shift. The recently launched 2020 career management framework and mobility policy may also help. It is not clear how this will apply to national staff, who sometimes stay in a position for over 10 years, despite no longer suiting the capacity needs of the office. However, overall changes in performance management are positive, as they signal to staff that performance expectations need to be met and that there are financial and career consequences for not meeting them.

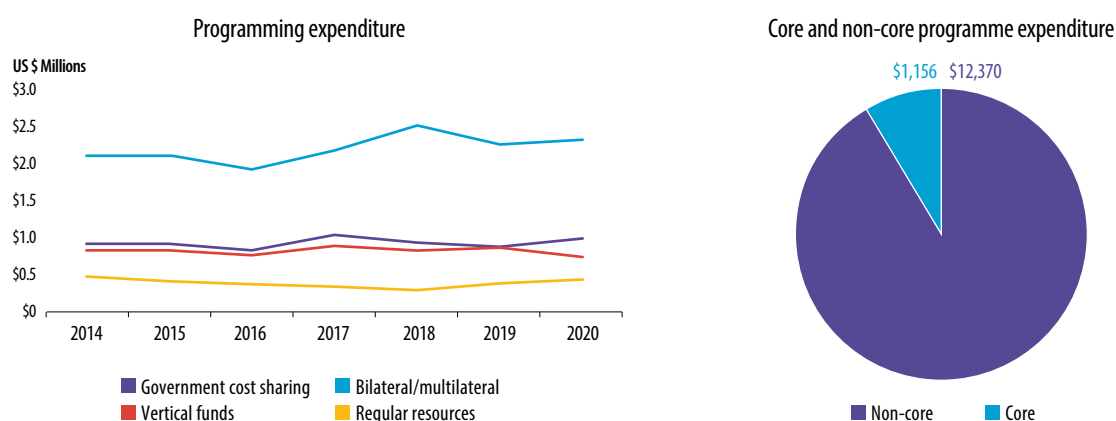
Finding 17. UNDP funding flows and trends — Despite the challenging financial context, UNDP has sustained a stable influx of non-core resources and managed to increase regular core resources with agile mobilization and repurposing of funds to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The financing aspect of UNDP's business model continues to adapt, and more attention is being paid to further diversification of funding sources. The changes

in composition of income show how UNDP has tried to be flexible, setting the ground for a closer examination in the next strategic plan.

A total of \$16.09 billion was spent between 2018 and 2020, \$13.53 billion of it on programming and 94 percent of this expenditure at the country level (Figure 18). Twelve percent of total UNDP expenditure (\$2.01 billion) and 9 percent (\$1.16 billion) of programme expenditure came from core regular resources. UNDP has received a steady level of non-core resources and a very important increase in core resources during this strategic plan period. The core resources mobilized in 2020 increased to \$768 million in 2020 from \$628 million in 2017. In 2020, \$449 million in core resources was spent on programming, an increase of \$102 million (or 29 percent) over core spending in 2017.

From non-core resources, spending through government cost sharing peaked in 2017, declining through 2019 and increasing in 2020. There has been a decline in bilateral/multilateral spending since 2019. Vertical fund expenditures have fluctuated, dropping in 2018 before increasing slightly in 2019 and declining again in 2020.

FIGURE 18. Programme expenditure by funding source, 2014–2020 (US\$ Millions)



Source: Final programme financial data from BPPS (2014–2019), preliminary 2020 data from BMS

Most regular resources (74 percent) are focused on least developed countries.¹⁹⁴ This emphasis on a declining number of poorer developing countries is not aligned with the premise of the Strategic Plan, which is not conditioned on a country's income status; rather it intends to help deliver development results for challenges across the three development contexts in which UNDP operates. This is especially important given that 62 percent of the world's poor people live in middle-income countries;¹⁹⁵ most conflict-affected countries outside Africa are not least developed countries; and natural disasters continue to severely hamper the development prospects of small island developing states. Moreover, middle-income countries have limited access to official development assistance, meaning they have even less chance of mobilizing other/non-core resources.

As argued in the evaluation of middle-income countries, UNDP has yet to “consider the use of HDI [human development index] and other essential parameters for human development”¹⁹⁶ for resource allocation. Decisions on the allocation of regular resources through TRAC 1 [Target for Resource Assignment from the Core], however, are a matter for the Executive Board. UNDP committed to conducting consultations and submitting options on the application of non-income measures for core resource allocation to the Executive Board in the context of the development of the integrated budget and integrated resources plan for the 2022–2025 Strategic Plan.

To secure more flexible non-core resources, the UN Funding Compact¹⁹⁷ strongly underscores the importance of pooled funding¹⁹⁸ through

inter-agency mechanisms and thematic funding windows. Despite an increase, pooled funding accounted¹⁹⁹ for only 9 percent of UNDP's programme expenditure and 17 percent of total bilateral/multilateral spending during the strategic plan period. Between 2018 and 2020, the expenditure from pooled funding increased by 37 percent, from \$351 million to \$480 million. At the same time, half the pooled funding expenditure was on projects for which UNDP plays a managing agent role,²⁰⁰ meaning it has no discretion over programming and simply channels funds through NGOs to implement programmes.

There is also increasing competition for pooled resources. While there has been an increase in the proportion of pooled resources channelled to NGOs through UNDP, it has been declining for projects directly implemented by UNDP. The proportion of multi-partner trust fund resources for direct UNDP implementation declined from 25 per cent in 2016 to 21 per cent in 2019. Additionally, while these resources enable more collective UN action, there has been limited resource commitment from some donors as well as programme countries. In 2019 over 80 per cent of the deposits were made by eight donors.²⁰¹

Between 2018 and 2020, resources spent through UNDP thematic funding windows increased substantially, from \$32 million to \$147 million, because of pandemic response. However, at \$228 million, the windows only accounted for 3 percent of bilateral/multilateral expenditure and less than 2 percent of total expenditure. In 2019, four new funding windows were established: poverty and inequality; governance, peacebuilding, crisis

¹⁹⁴ Allocations of regular resources for country-level programme activities are made through the Target for Resource Assignment from the Core system.

¹⁹⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mic/overview>.

¹⁹⁶ UNDP, 'Evaluation of UNDP Development Cooperation in Middle-Income Countries', 2020, para 233.

¹⁹⁷ A set of multilateral commitments between the UNDS and its Member States. <https://undocs.org/A/74/73/Add.1>.

¹⁹⁸ Through pooled funding the United Nations receives contributions from multiple financial partners and allocates those resources to multiple implementing entities. Similarly, UNDP funding windows are a pooled, flexible funding mechanism that provide an opportunity for partners to contribute long-term to different thematic areas.

¹⁹⁹ Pooled funding data from the Multi-Partner Trust Fund. <http://mptf.undp.org/>.

²⁰⁰ As the managing agent UNDP is acting as provider of contract administrative services; it is not acting within the framework of its own programme; and the NGO and the steering committee are programmatically accountable.

²⁰¹ Out of the \$1.3 billion deposited to the pooled funds in 2019, 84 per cent of funds were deposited by Canada, Denmark, the European Union, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom.

and resilience; nature, climate and energy; and gender equality and women's empowerment. In 2020, \$307 million was received in contributions, \$185 million for the COVID-19 sub-window under the governance window. About 67 per cent (\$97 million) of the spending has been on the COVID-19 sub-window while other expenditures are linked to commitments from previous funding windows. Only \$455,000 has been received for the gender equality and women's empowerment window so far.²⁰²

Part of UNDP's resource mobilization strategy is to deepen and extend partnerships with international financial institutions and the private sector. About \$676 million was received from international financial institutions in 2018–2019, a 50 percent increase compared with the previous biennium,²⁰³ largely in conflict settings. A number of stakeholders consulted indicate that support from these banks is indispensable for their programmes. However, the squeeze on general management support²⁰⁴ rates sometimes demanded by the financial institutions, and now permissible under certain conditions,²⁰⁵ can bring the rates below the level UNDP needs for full cost recovery.²⁰⁶ In some cases this puts project oversight at risk. In 2018–2019, \$89 million was raised from private sector contributions, a reduction from the \$126 million raised over the previous biennium.²⁰⁷

In addition to flexibility, funding predictability is important if UNDP is to more effectively address medium- to longer-term outcomes developed in United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks. Multi-year regular resource commitments by Member States reached

58 percent of the total resources received in 2019 compared to 22 percent in 2016.²⁰⁸ COVID-related financing was also an example of UNDP successfully securing government commitments.

For its June 2020 Beyond Recovery Strategy, UNDP called for a further \$700 million in COVID-19 funding support.²⁰⁹ By February 2021, the COVID-19 monitoring dashboard showed an overall funding allocation of \$1.2 billion, with \$641 million in new funds²¹⁰ and \$573 million in repurposed funds, of which \$687 million has been utilized (57 percent). Health systems support and inclusive and integrated crisis management account for 57 percent of fund utilization so far. At the same time, a UN-wide COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund for socioeconomic responses in middle- and lower-income countries has fallen short of its funding goals; donors have allocated only \$75 million on a \$1 billion request. UNDP has received \$11.2 million so far from the COVID-19 multi-partner trust fund.

Results-based budgeting is not very evident in UNDP's funding strategy, creating further challenges in attracting predictable resources. The previous strategic plan evaluation recommended that, "UNDP should transition from political budgeting to a more risk- and results-based budgeting process, to more effectively link results to resources." UNDP management views this agreed recommendation as having been implemented through the "results and resources linking process" in July 2018 and the reporting of annual results through the IRRF and ROAR.

There are shortcomings in these processes, as presented in previous findings. It is not evident that

²⁰² UNDP, 'Funding Windows Portal'. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/funding/funding-windows/allocations.html>, accessed February 2021.

²⁰³ UNDP, 'Midterm Review of the Integrated Resources Plan and Integrated Budget 2018–2021', 2020, para. 23.

²⁰⁴ Costs to UNDP that are in addition to direct project costs associated with managing the implementation of programmes are levied through the application of the general management support fee.

²⁰⁵ BMS announced on 19 June 2020 that a general management support rate of 5 percent would apply for all international financial institutions with an annual volume that exceeds \$50 million for loan or credit guarantee implementation support.

²⁰⁶ The evaluation team was informed that the actual average overhead cost for UNDP is 6.2 percent.

²⁰⁷ UNDP, 'UNDP Funding Compendium 2019', September 2020.

²⁰⁸ UNDP, 'Structured Dialogue on Financing the Results of the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018–2021', July 2020.

²⁰⁹ \$200 million to continue phase 1 (continued health crisis support) and \$500 million for phase 2, including governance (\$150 million), social protection (\$120 million), green economy (\$150 million) and digital disruption and innovation (\$80 million).

²¹⁰ Including through the funding window.

results-based management and budgeting have been robustly implemented in UNDP. Many country programmes and projects begin and commit to results with insufficient clarity of costs and without secured resources, especially if they are multi-year initiatives. It is noted, however, that to address the resource challenge, in 2020 UNDP conducted the corporate-wide costing for results exercise. Based on it, the funding gap analysis to achieve the Strategic Plan was presented at the informal consultation of the structured financing dialogue in August 2020.²¹¹

A number of consulted stakeholders indicated that UNDP can better articulate its value proposition to attract more funding. The Strategic Plan highlights the fact that each country's development needs,

priorities and challenges are different. This demands a fundamentally country-centric approach to development, and this is at the heart of UNDP's business model. Insufficient efforts have been made at central level on country-focused funding. Country offices are mostly expected to mobilize resources on their own, and this takes place in a very inconsistent way: In some offices all staff seek funding opportunities, in others this is the role of office leadership alone. In some countries, staff are proactive, approaching donors and partners with proposals, in others the office is mainly reactive to demands and opportunities from the government and other donors and partners. All models have trade-offs and have been insufficient, at times even hindering attention to programme implementation.

²¹¹ UNDP, 'Structured Dialogue on Financing the Results of the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018–2021', September 2020.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

The conclusions and recommendations provided below are based on the findings described in Chapter 3, considering the broader context and analytical framework outlined in Chapter 2. The conclusions are designed to be mutually reinforcing, reflecting UNDP's strengths and challenges in designing and implementing the Strategic Plan 2018–2021. The recommendations are aimed at strengthening UNDP and are expected to feed into the development of the next strategic plan.

6.1 Conclusions

Conclusion 1. Strategic Plan vision and conceptual framework²¹² — The UNDP Strategic Plan is appreciated for its forward-looking integrated vision and flexibility, despite the need for more conceptual clarity and operational guidance. The Strategic Plan has contributed to improvements in development results, but the aspirational vision of integration and an innovative business model is not yet fully evident at country level. The transformation envisaged in the Strategic Plan requires more time, greater capabilities and more flexible management and financial models.

The Strategic Plan was drafted and implemented in an especially challenging context of radical uncertainty, during the transition of Administrators, the new phase of UNDS reform, delinking of coordination functions from UNDP and the emergency response to COVID-19. UNDP put in motion various needed internal reforms, policy reviews and new tools. While these are in different stages of implementation and their effectiveness

cannot yet be fully determined, there is growing recognition that more integrated and innovative approaches are being promoted, but there is also clear evidence of areas needing improvement.

UNDP has remained a highly valued partner. It continues to be more valued for its traditional roles of programme and project implementation. Although innovation and integration are taking shape through some project and programme implementation, this is not evident yet to many partners. The new elements proposed as the structure and approach for the next generation UNDP are not yet accompanied by a fit-for-purpose results framework, capabilities or financing modalities aligned to sufficiently evolved and innovative business models on the ground.

In addition, the logic of focusing on each country's unique context, challenges and priorities to accelerate progress towards achievement of the SDGs as described in the Strategic Plan has yet to be matched with a more differentiated and tailored approach to programming in different country contexts. Insufficiently flexible management and financing models, limited application of integrative approaches, weak resources and results monitoring framework, and lack of clarity about concepts — including the form of global and country support platforms and performance and innovation streams — have challenged full achievement of the Strategic Plan vision and the expected organizational transformation.

Conclusion 2. The role of UNDP in the UNDS and the 2030 Agenda²¹³ — The recent changes brought about through the UNDS reform compel UNDP

²¹² Connected to findings 1, 2, 3, 4.

²¹³ Connected to findings 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

to reposition itself with a more clearly articulated and focused value-added proposition based on its comparative strengths to achieve the SDGs. UNDP is especially well positioned to contribute to poverty eradication and promotion of good governance, and it is highly valued for its work in support of gender equality, environmental protection and building resilience to social, economic and environmental shocks and conflict. This is especially the case when this work is implemented in an integrated fashion with a focus on sustainable development principles.

The Strategic Plan's flexibility allowed UNDP to adapt and be a strong supporter of the UNDS reform, financially, operationally and through its technical work. This was particularly highlighted and praised in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The delinking of the resident coordinator function necessitated the recruitment of a new cadre of UNDP leaders at country level and the extension of operational support to the reformed resident coordinators' offices. It is generally acknowledged that UNDP managed this transition well.

A key challenge has been the articulation of UNDP's 'integrator' role. Many stakeholders, including the UNDCO and the Secretary-General, have asserted that UNDP is well positioned to play an integrator role, given its broad mandate and presence on the ground. But this has been a source of confusion, as all development entities are expected to take an integrated approach in all their work in support of the SDGs, which are by nature non-divisible and need to be addressed in an integrated fashion. Many other entities, including some new resident coordinators and some government foreign/planning/finance ministries, also claim to have and lead 'integration' functions. UNDP is better at communicating an intention to play a catalytic role to support SDG acceleration and innovation than at articulating its integrator role. UNDP is, however, well placed to support partner governments in undertaking integrated efforts through its long-standing and well-acknowledged strengths in the area of governance.

UNDP is spread thin and could benefit from more

strategic focus. While UNDP contributes to many if not all the SDGs, in terms of adding value, it is clearly focused and better positioned to contribute to poverty eradication and promotion of good governance. It is also acknowledged for its contributions in gender equality and women's empowerment, sustainable environment and building resilience. It is also clear that no work on poverty or governance can provide sustainable solutions without attention to gender equality and women's empowerment, sustainable environment and resilience-building, which lie at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. These are areas in which UNDP is also well positioned, especially in showing how the human development lens can help to address the current global crisis, replacing the narrow economic and financial approaches.

Conclusion 3. UNDP contribution to the SDGs²¹⁴
— The strengths and positioning of UNDP in relation to SDG integration have become gradually more evident. Yet inadequate monitoring and reporting of contributions to each individual SDG make it difficult to discern whether and to what extent the tools and support offered have been effective in achieving results and accelerating achievement of the SDGs.

UNDP has developed and helped countries implement multiple tools and offers for mainstreaming, accelerating, financing and providing policy support for the fulfilment of the SDGs. Almost all country offices (121 out of 136) have been engaged in SDG integration efforts. However, these tools and offers have not been adequately monitored, and the evidence available is not conclusive on their effectiveness or on the effectiveness and sustainability of results. UNDP's contributions to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have been affected by a results-based management approach that is less than fit for the complex nature of UNDP's decentralized work; fragmentation across a large number of projects; and insufficient attention to the consistent and effective mainstreaming of the sustainable development lens and the principles of leaving no one behind.

The lack of appropriate and timely national SDG

²¹⁴ Connected to findings 5, 6, 7.

monitoring data also challenges all development entities' ability to assess results, especially the disaggregated data needed to address the leave no one behind principle. Efforts to improve statistical capacity and the availability of credible SDG data have been insufficient, and progress is slow. No UN agency currently has the capacity or mandate to address the statistical needs for all 17 SDGs. UNDP is well positioned to play a greater role in helping to meet these challenges, but it has lacked adequate resources, broader partnerships and a systemic approach to undertake such a role more effectively.

Conclusion 4. Gender equality as an SDG accelerator²¹⁵ — The Strategic Plan's approach to further integration of gender equality and women's empowerment has proved to be a key accelerator of development results. UNDP has gradually moved away from counting beneficiaries by sex and towards engaging in more gender-responsive approaches that address the different needs of men and women. Contributions to systemic and sustainable transformation are still limited by insufficient financial and human resources and attention to promotion of sustainable behaviour change.

UNDP has made progress in moving beyond mainstreaming and starting to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment in a more responsive way. The Gender Equality Seal process has proved catalytic in supporting a more in-depth and integrated gender lens and gender-responsive approach, along with the principles of leave no one behind. More attention has yet to be given to the design, implementation and assessment of the effectiveness of gender results to ensure they continue to move in more responsive and transformative directions to promote sustainable behaviour change.

The gender marker has brought greater attention to gender-related financing requirements. UNDP has made deliberate decisions to allocate more core resources to underfunded gender programmes. But increases in financing have still been moderate at best, and the organization has

not met the suggested target of allocating 15 percent of financial expenditures to initiatives that have gender equality and/or the empowerment of women as their primary and explicit objective.

The resources allocated to SDG 5 (on gender) have been low, as has the allocation to the gender signature solution. Investment in human resources for gender has also been inadequate, with a reliance on contracted staff rather than full-time employees as gender specialists; and there are still many countries with large portfolios lacking dedicated gender advisers/specialists despite policy commitments. While good progress has been made in overall gender parity, particularly at senior leadership levels, the picture remains skewed at regional and country levels.

Conclusion 5. Innovation and digital transformation²¹⁶ — The Strategic Plan signalled a timely shift for UNDP innovation work, moving it from the margins to the heart of the organization. Investments in the accelerator lab network and the digital strategy illustrate efforts to renew the UNDP programmatic offer with innovation, and they are strengthening country office capabilities to innovate. More effective innovation management will depend on improvements to UNDP knowledge management systems, stakeholder interest, financial resources and a more deliberate approach to scaling up success.

The disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a context that further enhanced the relevance of these investments, presenting an opportunity to accelerate their adoption and demonstrating their utility and timeliness as uncertainty and digital operations became the new norm. New demands emerging from the response and adaptation to the pandemic as well as from the UN system-wide agenda represent new opportunities for UNDP to assert itself in digital development.

COVID-19 also made evident and urgent the need to innovate, especially via digital transformation, which has become a requirement. This opens opportunities for efficiencies and effectiveness and has the

²¹⁵ Connected to findings 6, 7.

²¹⁶ Connected to findings 8, 9, 10, 11.

potential to accelerate sustainable development, but it is not without risks. Normative guidance and support to country offices will be critical to manage the potential risks of this new digital era. While service offers in these areas are emerging, UNDP has yet to clearly identify its value proposition in digital spaces. This will be needed to focus on investments that align its internal capabilities so UNDP can fully live up to its expected role as a development agency.

The absence of a formal and deliberate corporate approach to scaling innovations is another key challenge, resulting in a reactive and fragmented approach. Furthermore, innovation remains hindered by administrative bottlenecks and a risk-averse organizational culture. Important steps have been taken to improve the enabling environment, but they have been insufficient and slow, limiting the potential of existing investments in innovations commensurate with the ambition of the agenda.

Conclusion 6. Platforms²¹⁷ — The global and country support platforms established through the current Strategic Plan are helping to expand the expertise available at UNDP regional hubs and country offices. This is gradually enabling the organization to better manage and deploy its assets and capabilities to manage more context-specific, iterative and experimental approaches to problem-solving for sustainable development.

As an organization-wide network for the transfer of expertise and knowledge, the GPN is an improvement of previous iterations. It has the potential to enable UNDP to better assess demand for expertise and align the supply. This is especially important in light of the capacity shortages resulting from either financial constraints or lack of a consistent organization-wide platform to map the available talent across the organization. Whether this significant potential will be translated into results will depend on how well UNDP operationalizes the GPN in the coming years and manages the demand at country level through its regional hubs and networks.

Currently, the GPN lacks clearly defined milestones and targets to measure its effectiveness at delivering better results. It is not yet embedded in a broader strategy aimed at improving UNDP's position as a knowledge organization. Therefore, it lacks a sufficient understanding of the needs of its national partners; is unable to prioritize more rigorously the areas where UNDP wants to become an expert organization with deep expertise; and has not adequately developed capabilities in priority areas or ensured it recruits accordingly.

The focus of the country support platforms on problem solving through collaborative, iterative and experimental approaches is an important feature, differentiated from more traditional modes of implementation. CSPs' problem-solving approach recognizes that each problem is unique and embedded in a particular context that does not yield to generalized solutions. But CSPs are also harder to design and finance and involve greater risks. This necessitates greater efforts by country offices to model and establish the platforms and find the requisite financing, and most importantly integrate the CSPs well into the country programmes. Currently, there are insufficient awareness-raising, coaching and practical support for staff on the ground.

Conclusion 7. Performance monitoring, reporting and learning²¹⁸ — The UNDP performance monitoring and results reporting systems continue to improve, including due to recent efforts to strengthen the IRRF and the broader monitoring and reporting system, introducing machine learning for analysis. Yet gaps remain that hinder accurate reporting for results-based management. UNDP performance monitoring and results reporting systems are still not fit for results-based management and accurate reporting. The quality of the results framework, the indicators used, and the data collected and reported are problematic. Beyond capturing lessons, limited attention is being paid to using them in improving results, catalysing and scaling up success and innovation, and accelerating achievement of the SDGs.

²¹⁷ Connected to findings 12, 13.

²¹⁸ Connected to findings 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16.

The system of aggregation for organization-wide reporting masks significant issues and opportunities for improvement and learning at the country level. The methodology and data, even to ensure accountability, have significant shortcomings. They yield limited useful information for country offices and national partners to learn from and improve results. They also do not consider national context, in contrast with the spirit and practical application of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Various Strategic Plan initiatives — such as SDG acceleration processes, the platforms and accelerator labs — also have challenges in terms of their results framework and monitoring and reporting of progress. This includes reporting on COVID-19 responses.

There have been efforts over the years to strengthen results-based management, monitoring and reporting, with incremental improvements. But there has never been a more fundamental reform truly able to address the issues raised in this evaluation and others and to foster learning to improve results at the country level. The organization has started to capture more lessons but not necessarily to use them. It has improved the use of country-level evaluations, audits and corporate surveys to report and assess UNDP's performance but insufficiently to learn from and promote changes and improve decision-making and allocation of resources.

Conclusion 8. Management and UNDS operational backbone²¹⁹ — UNDP has improved its management and operations. It has shown determination to be a more client-oriented operational services provider committed to improving people management, learning and development; streamlining processes and procedures; and expanding investments in digital and technological innovation. Despite significant progress, operational and administrative shortcomings remain. These include limited agility and flexibility for adaptive management and funding models. Flatter decision-making structures are needed to respond to fast-evolving development challenges.

Reforms to deliver more timely and effective management and operational services are under way. Management costs have been reduced; the budget balanced; more cohesive people management and learning and development strategies are being implemented; the organization's carbon footprint has been reduced; more operational services have been clustered in shared service units; and processes and procedures have been streamlined. In addition, digital and technological innovations are increasingly being harnessed to improve efficiency.

Clustering has been rolled out to all countries, and 57 country offices are consolidating processes in finance, human resources and procurement, although this continues to be a stuttering process delaying further efficiencies, cost-savings and economies of scale. Key to the success of these improvements is that many have been underpinned by increased senior level oversight, and significant resources have been invested.

Despite improvements, overall, UNDP still lacks adaptive management and funding models that incorporate the necessary level of agility and flexibility, flatter decision-making structures and empowered teams that can respond in a timely fashion to the systemic transformation required for integrated development solutions, and for UNDP to more efficiently operate in an increasingly dynamic and uncertain environment. Insufficient focus has been placed on addressing the risk-averse organizational culture, a key factor limiting UNDP's nimbleness and flexibility. This further contributes to a culture of conflict avoidance where poor performance and behaviour are not consistently reported and addressed. This has hindered innovation, learning and opportunities to improve results. In addition, limited attention and resources have been given to learning and development capabilities, particularly in programme areas. This is needed to enhance the knowledge and skills of programme staff in systems thinking so the organization can work with the complex approaches needed to support countries to achieve the SDGs and transform the risk-averse culture of the organization.

²¹⁹ Connected to findings 11, 12, 14, 15, 16.

Conclusion 9. Funding²²⁰ — UNDP has sustained relatively stable resources during challenging financial times, even as it faces increasing pressure to find innovative ways to fund its work and to partner with non-traditional donors. Unless UNDP is able to move away from the ‘projectized’ nature of its funding model and find more effective, predictable and flexible ways to fund integrated programming, it will be difficult to resource the systemic transformation needed for the integrated approaches and solutions highlighted in the Strategic Plan.

It is noteworthy that UNDP has managed to sustain a good influx of resources, even in these difficult financial times. However, the organization continues to be challenged by funding predictability and limitations in flexibility to allocate resources, especially regarding the right level of core/non-core earmarking in different country contexts and typologies. The income-based approach that UNDP takes to allocate regular resources, the projectized nature of UNDP’s funding model and weaknesses in results-based and multi-year budgeting are key constraining factors.

UNDP acknowledges the challenges of the income-based approach to allocation of regular resources and has committed to present alternatives in the next IRRF. However, unless UNDP is able to move away from the projectized nature of its funding model and find more effective, predictable and flexible ways of funding integrated programmes, portfolios, platforms and innovations within countries, it will be challenging to fund the systemic transformation needed for the integrated approaches and solutions highlighted in the Strategic Plan.

The administrative constraints to utilizing funds are still a serious impediment to the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNDP’s work. Insufficient attention has been paid from headquarters and most regional bureaux to consider country programme funding more strategically and to mobilize resources directly to country programmes, portfolios and platforms. Demonstrating more clearly the cost-effectiveness

and positive difference UNDP will make with the funding it receives through direct contributions and pooled funding mechanisms is also a key area of weakness at country level. It leads to the unintended consequences of staff focusing on financial delivery rates as a key performance target rather than development results.

Conclusion 10. COVID-19 response²²¹ — The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted programmes in many countries, but it has also presented opportunities that UNDP has capitalized on to leverage its resources and capabilities in support of Member States’ preparedness and response strategies. There remains space for UNDP to further leverage its thought leadership on human development approaches to help development partners be bold and think differently, beyond COVID response and 2030, and to build forward better, more equitably and sustainably.

UNDP has worked closely with the UNDS to coordinate and align social/economic responses and has ensured that its operational services were able to respond quickly. The initial organizational response to COVID-19 has revolved around ensuring the timely and flexible delivery of guidance and services, including financial and other support from the GPN and teams on the ground. UNDP’s timely service delivery has been aided by reductions in internal bureaucratic requirements during the pandemic. UNDP has been particularly relevant in supporting the development of SEIAs and SERPs.

It is not clear, however, whether UNDP has been able to consistently ensure the human development perspective and human rights-based approach in these instruments and to leverage the opportunity to think differently beyond COVID response and 2030, and to pull country offices and Member States away from business as usual. The increased collaboration during the pandemic has raised partners’ expectations that the UNDS will continue in a more coordinated way as the pandemic recedes and the focus turns to recovery efforts, building forward better, aligned with the goals of UN reform.

²²⁰ Connected to findings 4, 8, 9, 16.

²²¹ Connected to findings 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 15, 16.

6.2 Recommendations

Recommendation 1. UNDP's role and value proposition²²² — In the next strategic plan, UNDP should better define its role and value proposition in support of the 2030 Agenda and the COVID-19 pandemic response. It should give attention to the organization's altered position at the country level following UNDS reform and anchor its work on its most recognized comparative strengths. It should put particular focus on inclusiveness and sustainability principles to build forward better with attention to leaving no one behind.

While actively collaborating with other UN agencies in support of all SDGs where logical and efficient, UNDP should strive to be a development innovator. It should make better use of new mechanisms to promote integrated development solutions with a focus on the SDGs where it has comparative strengths. Such focus does not mean that UNDP will not contribute to most, if not all, of the other SDGs; given the integrated nature of the Goals, UNDP's broad contribution is inevitable. But particular attention should be ensured to integrate the sustainability lens and the leave no one behind principles as catalysers of SDG fulfilment. Furthermore, the focus of the next strategic plan should be on supporting the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, not only to help with recovery but to reset development pathways for a green future, with equality and resilience to build forward better.

UNDP should pay renewed attention to (a) reducing poverty and inequalities and strengthening social protection; (b) promoting the transition to a green economy and leveraging its successful work on environment and natural resource management; (c) strengthening democratic and inclusive institutions, especially through digital transformation, and (d) supporting more resilient societies, with a broader focus on shocks, including the climate emergency, conflicts and the future of work. All this work should be expanded with foresight and complexity scenario systems thinking.

In addition, UNDP should better foster the humanitarian-peace-development nexus to better address inequalities with a rights-based, evidence-informed and human-centred approach, stressing the importance of ensuring systemic and transformative results that are socioeconomically and environmentally long-lasting.

UNDP is not alone in its integration work, as this function should be a shared responsibility with UNCTs and other development partners. However, with its universal presence and global network, UNDP should strategically position itself at the forefront of integrated solutions, serving as a catalyst, helping to accelerate SDG fulfilment and fostering more innovative ways of working, including through whole-of-government, whole-of-society and whole-of-UN approaches.

In this process, UNDP will need to better monitor and evaluate its SDG contributions, tools and offers, and ensure more adequate stakeholder mapping to effectively work across complex systems. This should be done while recognizing different players' comparative strengths to 'connect the dots' across development issues. Actions should include networked solutions that involve diverse stakeholders and partnerships focusing on specific SDGs. This will aid collaborative design and implementation of resilient systems that can adapt quickly to changes in different areas and absorb shocks, to ensure resilience and sustainability.

All that will require the next strategic plan to bring greater clarity of concepts, such as integrated approaches, SDG integration and integrator roles. It will also be necessary to have more specific guidance for delivery mechanisms, alternative financing modalities and flexible business models to help operationalize the systemic transformation envisioned for this decade of action.

²²² Connected to conclusions 1, 2, 3, 10.

Recommendation 2. Innovations²²³ — To meet the increasing demands driven by the change in context brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, UNDP's work on innovation should prioritize support to partner countries on digital transformation, address administrative bottlenecks that hinder innovation, ensure improvements to knowledge management systems and develop a more deliberate approach to tracking and scaling up successful innovations that can accelerate achievement of the SDGs.

To help change the risk-averse organizational culture and ensure innovation can be accelerated, it is particularly important for UNDP to be bold in proactively addressing remaining administrative bottlenecks that limit experimentation, learning and private sector engagement. To optimize return on investments and accelerate results, UNDP should take steps to ensure dynamic alignment between its organizational policies and the evolving innovation agenda to formalize support for scaling up successful solutions and practices into its mainstream work. In this regard, clear, communicable norms and evidence benchmarks to support measurement and transparent decision-making over scaling is required to support the participation of all business units.

Building on its comparative advantages, UNDP should focus its attention on social and digital innovation. It should help country offices and national governments to navigate some of the emerging complex challenges and opportunities associated with private sector engagement, the use of new technologies and the implications of new working methods. Furthermore, it will be important to prioritize the formalization of distinct support models to ensure that digital opportunities are harnessed across UNDP country offices, taking into account the various contexts in which they operate.

Recommendation 3. Gender equality and women's empowerment as an SDG accelerator²²⁴ — UNDP should further articulate how to expand and achieve the concrete benefits of integrating gender equality

and women's empowerment as a catalytic development accelerator for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The Gender Equality Seal process should be recommended to all offices. Efforts should be made to increase financial investment in gender across all areas and more adequately equip the organization with staff specialized in gender and able to implement systems that focus on gender-responsive and transformative results.

In the next strategic plan, UNDP needs to further articulate how to achieve the concrete benefits of integrating gender equality and women's empowerment as a development accelerator. This will also provide a clearer value proposition to donors on UNDP's unique added value in gender to accelerate achievement of the SDGs. With a systemic approach, all UNDP programmes should undergo GRES analysis at the design, implementation and evaluation phases to help UNDP achieve more responsive and transformative gender results.

More systemic approaches for transformation will require UNDP to meet or even exceed its commitment to allocate 15 percent of resources for initiatives that have gender equality or the empowerment of women as their primary and explicit objective. In this regard, the accuracy of the gender marker should be strengthened. More guidance is required for country offices to develop a common understanding on how to use the marker more strategically. The marker assigned at the design stage should, if needed, be adjusted during the implementation stage. Stronger quality assurance processes are needed at both the country and regional levels to ensure proper use of the GRES and the gender marker.

Given its proven catalytic potential, UNDP should require that all offices engage in the Gender Equality Seal process. Efforts should also be made to scale up the use of the Seal not just in the private sector but also in government. This will require more staff capacity to work gender equality and women's empowerment into all levels, with adequate staff contractual arrangements for gender specialists.

²²³ Connected to conclusions 5, 10.

²²⁴ Connected to conclusions 3, 4, 10.

At the same time, it will be important to deepen the mainstreaming of the gender perspective beyond binary visions across all teams, instead of continuing the current overreliance on gender focal points. Further gender parity efforts should evolve to focus on improving working conditions for women. For instance, more attention should be given to unpaid care (a need underscored by COVID-19) while also augmenting UNDP's human resources policy by aligning paternity leave for fathers and maternity/paternity leave for same-sex parents with current maternity leave provisions. These policy shifts can help support the transformation of roles within the household, which also impacts gender equality in the workplace.

Recommendation 4. Global Policy Network and country support platforms²²⁵— UNDP should make more effective use of its GPN to improve mobility of expertise and programming rigour with well-defined targets, milestones and effectiveness measures. In addition, a more comprehensive and strategic approach should be promoted for the establishment of CSPs, by advancing their conceptual framework and criteria for assessment and by providing mechanisms for practical support and guidance to promote portfolio- and systems-based approaches.

UNDP should improve the deployment of internal expertise across regions and strengthen incentives to facilitate the mobility of policy advisers from one region to another. It should make better use of the expertise residing in country offices through systems and incentives, making sure the mobility policy reaches national officers. Global policy centres should be more effectively connected to the GPN infrastructure, ensuring the GPN becomes a conduit that brings policy centres closer to the regional hubs and country offices. Likewise, options should be explored for fostering closer synergies between the GPN infrastructure and the other systems for financial and human resource management.

UNDP should sharpen its key GPN tools by improving guidance, the flow of information and the creation of incentives for better use of the system.

For CSPs to achieve desired results, UNDP should establish a comprehensive package of support for the country offices, including practical guidance, advisory and technical support, and provision for in-country coaching, if needed. This should include incentives to involve regional hubs, global policy centres and other UN agencies with the CSPs at the country level. CSPs will need to be supported by a comprehensive system for monitoring their performance and results at country and global levels through the annual reporting mechanism and IRRF. The sustainability of CSPs should be consistently assessed based on good practices, and country offices should be required to have adequate sustainability plans in place for their platforms, which should be vetted by the regional and global CSP support teams. CSPs should be tied more closely to regional bureaux and be coordinated through them. Finally, an effective interface is needed for the interaction between the GPN and the CSPs. As a foundation for this, it will be necessary to improve awareness about CSPs and the GPN among country offices and their partners.

Recommendation 5. Results based-management learning²²⁶ — UNDP should holistically redesign its entire results and performance monitoring and reporting framework and system. It should adopt indicators better aligned to the timeliness and utility of data; methods that can help measure results more credibly; more ambitious milestones; and greater focus and guidance. The aim is not only to consistently capture but also to better promote learning for country offices to improve results and accelerate achievement of the SDGs.

Monitoring and reporting should be augmented with the country programme as the unit of analysis.

²²⁵ Connected to conclusion 6.

²²⁶ Connected to conclusions 7, 10.

The organization should monitor and report on how many country programmes have met their annual milestones and country programme document results for those completing cycles, while tracking those that have not. While one system reporting on aggregate corporate level data will still be required, attention needs to be given to making it more useful for individual countries to learn from each other and improve results. Lessons should be shared, and the information should be used to prioritize support and resources to those countries where the targets have fallen short. Such an approach would align with the rationale of the Strategic Plan based on development settings and would constitute a more robust way to assess UNDP's performance and help countries to achieve and/or improve results.

In addition, UNDP should work with intermediate outcomes that can be more credibly linked to its interventions using better indicators and targets, supported with robust monitoring, evaluation and learning systems. The IRRF indicators will need to be redesigned to give the right attention to country-level reporting and the efficiency and effectiveness of delivery of programmes and results.

An improved results assessment and reporting system should be designed to integrate with the new enterprise resource planning system and the wide range of existing dashboards, tools and instruments, including audits, evaluations and corporate surveys. This will require additional personnel with the right capacities on monitoring and reporting, along with investments, to find new ways to measure progress in signature areas of work. Furthermore, UNDP can more rigorously measure and report on its concrete contributions to each of the SDG goals it commits to. The forthcoming revision of the UNSDG results-based management handbook and new QCPR present an opportunity for UNDP to engage in system-wide discussions to develop a results-based management framework that helps organizations and programme countries learn and accelerate SDG results.

Recommendation 6. Management and operations²²⁷ — To fully deliver on the Strategic Plan promise to evolve and innovate its businessmodel, UNDP should fully operationalize adaptive management and additional funding models and SDG financing capabilities to support systems transformation. This should address constraints for funding integrated programmes, portfolios, platforms and innovation and allow the organization to move away from mainly operating with project-based funding.

It will be important for UNDP to recommit to timelines and prioritize the completion of key management and operations workstreams that were delayed even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is needed to ensure that the right operational systems, policies, processes and staff mindset are in alignment to secure the timely deployment of adequate human and financial resources. This is particularly important for the clustering of operational services, given the financial and other benefits that will accrue to UNDP and partners on completion. The proposed clustering of human resources, finance and procurement services should be completed in all regions as quickly as reasonably practicable, and the risk of further delays should be mitigated. The continued attention of senior management and OHR is essential if the clustering process is to be concluded without further delay and in a way that secures the full benefits for the organization in all regions.

In time to allow for submission along with the new Strategic Plan, UNDP should also engage in structured discussions with the Executive Board about different approaches to the allocation of resources that better reflect the complexity, vulnerability, risk and uncertainty of different development settings. This should address constraints for funding integrated programmes, portfolios, platforms and innovation, and allow the organization to move away from mainly operating with project-based funding.

²²⁷ Connected to conclusion 8.

Central and regional bureaux should give more attention to partnerships that would allow donors to align their funding to specific country programmes, CSPs and accelerator labs with strategic interest in particular national needs and contexts. Furthermore, it will be important to strengthen UNDP's results-based budgeting capabilities, beyond the IRRF review, particularly at the country level. This will allow resources to be linked to a more adequate level of intermediate results that can measure the value for money of UNDP contributions to results.

Recommendation 7. People management and capabilities ²²⁸ — In recognition that UNDP's main asset is its workforce, the organization should deliver in a timely fashion on its People for 2030 and learning and development strategies. This will support improvement of staff capabilities for systems thinking and transformation; reward good performance that is results focused; and enable an innovative culture within the organization.

UNDP's OHR should have direct representation at the Executive Office or at least within the Organizational Performance Group, with the OHR director as a full member. This will ensure that every organizational decision is informed by the people perspective and will help address the risk aversion and conflict avoidance in the organizational culture.

Management — working closely with the cohort of #NextGen leadership, human resources business partners, 'people champions' and the GPN — needs to ensure the right resources and capabilities and improved policies and tools to support a culture change. This should include talent management to hold people more accountable for their performance and behaviour. There should be clearer linkages between performance/results and career opportunities and development.

An additional learning and development offer for programme and technical areas needs to be implemented to enhance the knowledge and skills of programme staff to respond to crises, such as COVID-19; further adapt to digital needs; and help countries use foresight to deal with complexity and uncertainty in recovering from crisis through building forward better. Thus, it is imperative to apply more reliable learning assessment methodologies to measure how learning and development initiatives enhance capacities and influence the delivery of results. Lessons learned should be documented and used to inform course corrections, future investment and policy decisions.

²²⁸ Connected to conclusions 8, 10.

ANNEXES

Annexes to the report (listed below) are available on the website of the IEO at: <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/9528>

Annex 1. Methodological note

Annex 2. Detailed analysis of the integrated results and resources framework

Annex 3. UNDP activities supporting SDG integration

Annex 4. Terms of reference

Annex 8. People consulted

Annex 9. Documents consulted



EVALUATION

OF UNDP STRATEGIC PLAN 2018–2021

Independent Evaluation Office
United Nations Development Programme
One UN Plaza, DC1-20th Floor
New York, NY 10017, USA
Tel. +1(646) 781 4200



[/www.undp.org/evaluation](http://www.undp.org/evaluation)

[/UNDP_Evaluation](#)

[/ieoundp](#)

[/evaluationoffice](#)

Evaluations for a #StrongerUNDP