



# Evaluation of the United Nations Volunteers 2018-2021 Strategic Framework

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## Final Report

Prepared for //

United Nations Volunteers (UNV)

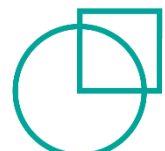
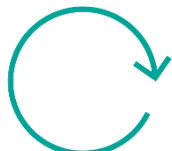
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Evaluation of the United Nations Volunteers 2018-2021 Strategic Framework  
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# Executive Summary

## Background

The evaluation of the 2018-2021 Strategic Framework (SF) was conducted as part of UNV's 2018-21 evaluation work plan. The evaluation provides accountability to both internal and external stakeholders related to the planning, implementation and results of the SF as well as a learning opportunity for the preparation of the next SF 2022-2025.

## Evaluation objective, purpose and scope

This evaluation of the SF covers the full strategic period 2018 to 2021 and UNV's strategies, work and activities developed and implemented related to the SF. The primary objectives of the evaluation are to:

- Assess the relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of outcomes achieved or expected to be achieved by UNV during the period covered by the 2018-21 SF.
- Facilitate learning from the UNV experience during the SF period; with regard to outcome 1, outcome 2, the interlinkages between both outcomes, as well as institutional effectiveness.
- Validate and follow up on the findings and future actions identified in the SF's Mid-Term Review (MTR).
- Provide strategic recommendations regarding the next Strategic Framework 2022-25.

## Methodology

The evaluation was conducted between October 2020 and April 2021 by a team of three senior independent evaluators, plus supporting research assistance. The evaluation approach was based on highly consultative and comprehensive data collection and analyses processes including all levels of the organisation and external stakeholders. The evaluation applied a mixed-methods approach, combining multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative evidence, including: i) a systematic desk review of more than 150 internal and external documents; ii) engagement from more than 2,500 stakeholders, including over 120 internal and external consultations with stakeholders through interviews and focus group discussions conducted at country, regional and headquarters (HQ) levels; and iii) two

surveys conducted in three languages involving almost 200 partners (with a response rate of 18.7%) and over 2,200 UN Volunteers (38.9%). The evaluation was managed by the UNV Executive Office (ExO) under the supervision of the Chief of ExO, and in cooperation and direct consultation with the Management Team. In February 2021, consultations with the Management Team were held to present emerging findings and a presentation was made to all staff at a Townhall Meeting. Based on the key evaluative findings, the following conclusions and recommendations are presented.

## Conclusions

### Relevance and coherence

#### Conclusion 1 (based on findings #1-10; and 12<sup>1</sup>)

**SF 2018-21 has been instrumental for providing strategic focus and guidance and has served to consolidate UNV's position as a key actor that is uniquely placed to integrate volunteerism in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.**

The SF is highly relevant to the needs of key stakeholders; is coherent, responsive and explicit in relation to the 2030 Agenda and clearly aligned with the resolutions that have shaped UNV's mandate. The SF is highly relevant to UNV's needs, aligning the organisation's work with QCPR 2016, alongside successfully addressing a challenging financial situation and strengthening institutional effectiveness. UNV's comparative advantages are manifold, including: i) its capacity to directly contribute to the work of UN agencies by providing flexible, timely, cost-effective human resources through a comprehensive range of volunteer modalities that are effectively delivered at country, regional and/ or global levels; ii) its unique convening power and distinction as the only UN entity with a mandate related to volunteerism; iii) its ability amplify globally the value of volunteer actions led by the global South and effectively support South-South cooperation. Key external partners note, however, further opportunities for UNV to leverage its unique position to play a stronger knowledge brokering role in the volunteer sector.

The internal logic and coherence of the SF could be strengthened, since in the absence of explicit interlinkages between Outcome 1 and Outcome 2,

<sup>1</sup> Findings statements are presented in the main section of the evaluation report, in clear coloured boxes, sequentially numbered with supporting evidence and analysis present below each.

their implementation has operated more in parallel, rather than in a coherent and complementary manner.

### Conclusion 2 (based on findings #11-14)

**The SF has brought about positive results for UNV under both strategic outcomes and has successfully introduced innovative measurement mechanisms that have contributed to strengthening UNV's results-based approach. However, outputs are not fully adequate in scope and number to cover each outcome, and the indicator basket does not fully capture all the richness and complexity of UNV's results and achievements.**

Overall, the SF is logical, coherent and has brought improved organisational focus and clarity to the work of UNV. However, there remains room for improvement at two levels: the inter-relatedness between Outcome 1 and Outcome 2, and indicator formulation. Whilst the strategic outcomes provide organisational focus, this has also resulted in elements of siloed implementation. Measurement mechanisms developed under this SF, through growing maturity of the RBM culture in UNV, are innovative and constitute a significant improvement compared to the systems in place prior to 2018. Nonetheless, challenges remain in terms of the limitations of the indicator basket (i.e. what is being measured), since the indicators used to measure progress towards each output do not adequately capture all the results achieved and the difference they are making. Targets were set realistically, based on an assessment of external factors, though opportunities for further ambition are possible in the next SF.

### Efficiency

#### Conclusion 3 (based on findings #15-33)

**The implementation of the SF has been accompanied by an ambitious organisational transformation process that has been efficiently delivered. Decentralization has brought UNV closer to its partners with positive results reflected both inside UNV (operational efficiency) and outside UNV (mobilization); while digital transformation is likely to result in significant efficiency gains during the remaining SF implementation period. However, FU capacity requires strengthening and staff capabilities have not fully kept pace with the organisation's shifting demands and the rapidly evolving context.**

UNV has invested significant effort and resources to enhance its operational efficiency over the SF period through well planned and effectively implemented organisational improvement initiatives. This has included enhanced decentralisation to RO and FU levels and increased professionalisation/nationalisation of key field-based roles; revisions and extensions to delegations of authority; the establishment of a new Internal Control Framework; delivery of digital transformation initiatives and streamlined business processes. These initiatives have resulted in more effective, decentralised delivery with improved institutional memory; strengthened national capacity and ownership, even if FU capacity still requires strengthening. Multiple levels of highly effective financial stewardship has stabilised UNV's financial health; with the principles of results-based budgeting and breakeven modelling tools effectively applied, aligning financial resources with the strategic objectives/ intended results of the SF. Clear gains are evident in delivery efficiency and, following the full implementation of digital transformation and the resulting benefits being fully realised, opportunities to create more cost-efficient service provision delivery to the benefit of UNV and the wider UN system are present.

### Effectiveness

#### Conclusion 4 (based on findings #34-38 and #45-47)

**UNV has implemented the SF as planned, achieving important results under both strategic outcomes and exceeding most targets to date. However, while focusing efforts on Outcome 2 has allowed UNV to restore its financial situation, recognizing resources contributing to the financial sustainability of UNV are generated mainly from the cost-recovery for the volunteer management services (Outcome 2), this approach risks fully leveraging the potential of Outcome 1. This may constitute a risk for both the organisation's long-term relevance and sustainability.**

UNV has been highly effective in achieving the intended outputs and outcomes. It has performed highly effectively in both Outcome 1 and Outcome 2 and for Institutional Effectiveness measures, exceeding most targets consistently over the SF period. Overall, UNV has implemented the SF as planned. Under Outcome 1, UNV has contributed to the increasing number of countries including references to the role of volunteerism in their VNRs; engaging more than 1,000,000 local non-UN volunteers across all regions in 22 countries; supporting policies and legislative development with

Member States; and supporting the General Assembly's adoption of the resolution on Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (73/140). Under Outcome 2, partners are highly satisfied with UNV's provision and deployment of UN Volunteers. In this regard, UNV has galvanised its reputation as a responsive and flexible partner organisation. However, there is a strong perception expressed from donors and partners that UNV should focus more on Outcome 1, which is where UNV's unique added value is perceived to lie. Recognising the symbiotic, rather than competing, nature of promoting volunteerism and mobilising volunteers, UNV risks disproportionately gearing operational resources in the pursuit of funding (cost-recovery); rather than promoting volunteerism (revenue rather than value driven). Although the focus on volunteer mobilisation has been fundamental to improving UNV's financial position, UNV risks its sustainability prospects if it continues to over-focus on its role as "HR provider" without embracing its expanded mandate with adequate resources. In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded the world of the value of volunteerism and provided evidence of its importance, thereby creating favourable conditions for a bold promotion of volunteerism. UNV attributes to itself a "residual duty of care" that may translate in liaising with host agencies "to ensure that policies and practices are being properly applied and that UN Volunteer's wellbeing and safety is assured". Whilst the vast majority of UN Volunteers noted their satisfaction with their experience (97% positive satisfaction); the evaluation finds that issues around well-being and fair treatment remain a concern for a minority of UN Volunteers who responded to open questions in the surveys. Concerns related to support and well-being were particularly noted for female UN Volunteers which provides useful information for UNV as it updates its Conditions of Service.

#### Conclusion 5 (based on findings #39-44)

**UNV has strengthened existing partnerships and succeeded in establishing new ones. However, the focus on UN Volunteer mobilization appears to have led UNV to prioritize partnerships that contribute to mobilization efforts to the detriment of partnerships with a stronger potential to promote volunteerism (such as VIOs and CSOs), that could support ongoing efforts to diversify UNV's partnership base. UNV has also focused more on output-oriented partnerships instead of investing in long-term outcome-orientated partnerships. UNV's resource mobilisation has been effective in meeting contribution targets.**

UNV engages with its partners effectively. It has highly productive engagements with partners and is highly efficient in the management of donor relations. Delivery of the SF has responded to the needs of donors and partners, particularly in relation to the mobilisation of UN Volunteers (Outcome 2), though the response to the volunteerism-promotion needs of partners (under Outcome 1) could be strengthened. UNV's reliance on the same small basket of donors remains a perennial challenge requiring further diversification. UNV has nurtured partnerships with organisations with the capacity to host UN Volunteers, although likely to some extent to the detriment of partnerships with the greatest potential (and/or legitimacy) to promote volunteerism and volunteer action. Both the increase in the number of UN Volunteers and the positive assessment of the recruitment service offered by UNV are the result of intensive partnership efforts carried out by UNV and are testament to the hard work of staff and senior management. UNV's resource mobilisation has been effective in meeting its contribution targets, both through the Special Voluntary Fund (SVF) and Fully Funded (FF) volunteer contributions, which have both increased under the SF.

#### Sustainability

##### Conclusion 6 (based on findings #48-61)

**UNV is widely recognised as a global agenda-setting organisation with unique convening power that generates high-quality knowledge and evidence on volunteerism and has the potential to play a stronger knowledge-brokering role in the volunteer sector.**

UNV's knowledge generation is recognised and appreciated inside and outside the UN system, including the production of a series of high-quality knowledge products (global and regional in scope) and the generation of relevant evidence for the volunteer sector (with a focus on contributions to SDGs), illustrating UNV's agenda-setting role in the sector. While partners perceive that UNV 'does what it does well', partners were equally strong in the perception that UNV could strengthen its role in terms of promoting volunteerism and enhancing its role in the evidence generation → knowledge brokering → setting the global agenda cycle. The comprehensive Knowledge Portal on Volunteerism for Development Practitioners and Policymakers launched in 2020, which constitutes one of the main outcomes of the Plan of Action process, has been well received and can be expected to play a pivotal role in promoting the uptake and use of knowledge and evidence generated under the current SF beyond 2021. The

latest knowledge products have strengthened UNV's credibility and positioning in research on volunteerism. However, no comprehensive analysis of use and uptake has been conducted, since metrics on outreach and uptake are limited, and no indicators linked to this aspect of knowledge management are included in the SF results framework.

## Cross-cutting issues

### Conclusion 7 (based on findings #62-64)

**UNV has made significant efforts to incorporate core principles related to human rights and equality during implementation of the SF with positive results to date. However, additional efforts are required to provide a more granular analysis of issues affecting gender and inclusion, in order to improve UNV's understanding of these issues and better reflect the SF's contribution to these themes, and to address issues related to the well-being of UN Volunteers.**

Reporting on cross-cutting issues continues to evolve, with gender disaggregated data on UN Volunteers presented in the narrative of the EB reports. Nonetheless, there are opportunities for further integration through systematic data disaggregation, analysis and reporting that would allow for a more nuanced understanding of issues around gender equality, provide learning opportunities for how UNV can strengthen its strategy and approach to gender and women's empowerment, and showcase the full range of achievements. Important milestone achievements have been reached in 2019 and 2020, with UNV reaching gender parity among UN Volunteers, with women representing 52 per cent of volunteers globally in 2020. UNV has several signed partnership agreements with UN agencies and donors to work on different aspects related to gender equality and social inclusion. Major efforts have been made on inclusion, as evidenced by the growing proportion of citizens from the Global South being deployed as UN Volunteers and the integration and inclusion of persons with disabilities as UN Volunteers, which have received significant praise from partners and donors. The inclusion of an increasing number of UN Volunteers from vulnerable population groups requires UNV to further prioritise equality and well-being issues, and points to the need to ensure that duty of care and safeguarding is adequately understood by host agencies.

### Conclusion 8 (based on findings #65)

**UNV has responded robustly to address the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic,**

**demonstrating agility and speed both externally with partners and operationally. The pandemic has provided a timely reminder of the value of volunteerism and has generated valuable evidence of the importance of volunteer action in responding to and recovering from crisis and for the achievement of the SDGs, thereby creating an enabling environment for UNV's work to continue to evolve and expand. In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded the world of the value of volunteerism and provided evidence of its importance, thereby creating favourable conditions for a bold promotion of volunteerism and the utilisation of online volunteering modalities.**

UNV's response to COVID-19 includes the deployment of 947 UN Volunteers on COVID-19 related assignments: with 780 National and 167 International UN Volunteers deployed from 117 nationalities to 108 locations internationally supporting 27 UN agencies. Furthermore, the rapid deployment of SVF-funded UN Volunteers has been an effective response, positively acknowledged by donors and partners, allowing 105 volunteers to be deployed rapidly to support the COVID-19 response. Internally, flexible institutional arrangements and increased tele-commuting are in place allowing UNV to continue to deliver; with staff perceiving working virtually to have further increased their sense of engagement. Whilst not accounting for a global health pandemic of the magnitude of COVID-19, UNV's comprehensive risk management and mitigation processes (including corporate risk logs detailing impact of political and global public health dynamics; financial risk analysis of impact of COVID-19) responded successfully, allowing response contingencies to disruptive global events to be enacted. Favourable conditions are present for UNV to adopt an even bolder and ambitious promotion of volunteerism in this new context.

## Recommendations

The evaluation recommendations are derived from the evaluative findings in this report and conclusions presented above.

### Relevance and coherence

#### Recommendation 1 – strategy (based on conclusion 1)

**UNV should rebalance its strategic focus** by strengthening actions on promoting volunteerism

developing appropriate mechanisms, either programmatically or otherwise, that promote the role of volunteerism in the 2030 Agenda, ensuring continued organisational relevance and deploying its comparative advantage in the delivery of the 2030 Agenda whilst continuing to respond to UN partner needs.

**UNV should ensure the inter-relatedness and complementarity of promoting volunteerism and volunteer mobilisation** is comprehensively articulated and embraced to reduce the risk of a split in strategic focus and operational siloing as well as to provide consistency in strategic messaging externally.

### Recommendation 2 – results measurement (based on conclusion 2)

**UNV should develop a comprehensive results framework** with gender sensitive, composite indicators to strengthen outcome-level reporting and ensure the full range of outputs and outcomes are accurately captured, monitored and reported. **UNV should include social inclusion indicators** (for example, People Living with Disabilities and marginalized groups).

**UNV should develop more comprehensive measures of results beyond the current limited basket of indicators**, across a broader range of indicators for management information and accountability purposes.

### Efficiency

#### Recommendation 3 – organisational structure, capacity and capability (based on conclusion 3)

**UNV should review the balance of financial and human resource distribution to the delivery of strategic outcome results**; ensuring the current structure is fit for purpose and geared towards implement the next SF through a gradual re-alignment and adjustment of its operating model and structure geared to strategic requirements. **UNV should continue to enhance decentralisation** by strengthening its field presence to meet current and future demand, in alignment with the QCPR (2020).

**UNV should seek to identify opportunities to foster further collaborative working practices** to ensure the full value of the inter-linkages between promoting volunteerism and volunteer mobilisation are harnessed, both horizontally between the organisation's sections and vertically through the global structure. This may include increasing opportunities for multi-disciplinary working on key

strategic and operational issues and strengthening internal organisational learning mechanisms.

**UNV should ensure UNV's operating structure is fit for purpose and geared towards implementing the next SF** by conducting a periodic needs assessment of required skills to meet the next SF period and accompanying skills audit. **UNV should ensure tailored learning and development opportunities to meet future need are available and taken up**, with impact assessed. Where additional skills are not present and cannot be developed internally, UNV should proportionately invest in securing those skills externally to meet future need. UNV should ensure that all staff can clearly articulate the different elements of its work across all strategic outcome areas in a consistent and coherent manner.

### Effectiveness

#### Recommendation 4 – engagement with UN Volunteers (based on conclusion 4)

**UNV should strengthen the engagement with UN Volunteers throughout their placement and beyond**, with the aim of further improving the UN Volunteers' experience matched to their expectations through the ongoing review and revision process of the Conditions of Service in order to leveraging the network of UN Volunteers to contribute to UNV's strategic objectives.

On the 'UN Volunteer experience', **UNV should improve the coordination between the host agencies and UNV field units in order to ensure the duty of care is discharged** appropriately to ensure the wellbeing and career development of UN Volunteers. UNV should ensure consultations with host agencies balance the needs of UN Volunteers with the demands of the agencies, as defined by UNV and its partners, to hold UN Volunteers and host agencies to account.

**UNV should utilise the untapped resource of former and current UN Volunteers** developing opportunities to further engage the network of UN Volunteers as a route to i) increase opportunities for learning; ii) exert further influence; and iii) access the networks of its constituency of UN Volunteers. This serves dual purposes - awareness raising on the value of volunteerism and in the promotion of the UNV brand.

### Recommendation 5a – partnerships (based on conclusion 5)

**UNV should develop strong value-propositions** that allow for consistent communication of its comparative advantage; demonstrate the uniqueness of partnering with UNV and articulate its added value to partners’ medium- and longer-term strategic and people objectives.

**UNV should ensure flexibility in its approach to customisation** by (balancing standardised and tailored products and services) with recruitment measures that ensure a commitment to volunteerism in order to maintain and protect UNV’s reputational brand. **UNV should strengthen outreach and awareness raising on the importance of the UN Volunteers in the host agencies**, increase the visibility of the UNV brand through its UN Volunteers; communicate the advantages of UNV and informing host agencies about the role of UN Volunteers.

**UNV should maximise its unique convening power to connect partners and expand and deepen its partnership strategy** for the promotion of volunteerism to support longer-terms forms of collaboration.

**UNV should make efforts to diversify and broaden its work with other UN agencies**; while maintaining the efficacy of its partnerships with core UN partners. **UNV should ensure its partnership engagement is both strategic and tactical in nature** (HQ, regional and field level engagements), by aligning UNV propositions with UN agencies’ global strategic planning processes and people strategies. This should include continued efforts to identify opportunities to strengthen and jointly capitalise on the relationship with UNDP.

### Recommendation 5b – Resource mobilization (based on conclusion 5)

**UNV should diversify its financing partnerships and review its tools and mechanisms for resource mobilisation**, and associated conditions, to facilitate increased contributions to UNV focus areas (for example, COVID-19, digital transformation, policy work).

**UNV should adopt a two-pronged approach on SVF both to increase SVF contributions and further diversify SVF partners.** In pursuit of diversification, UNV should pursue (soft) earmarking of contributions to attract new partners. UNV should explore further diversification strategies to increase the number of Member States contributing to Fully-Funded or providing other sources of funds to UNV.

## Sustainability

### Recommendation 6 – Knowledge development, management and organisational learning (based on conclusion 6)

**UNV should strengthen the links between knowledge development, knowledge management and organisational learning**, allowing UNV to maximise the use and uptake of data in a more systematic and strategic manner. This will help UNV to bridge the advocacy/ policy-making gap; ensure that volunteering policy is informed by high quality research; and strengthen the inter-linkage between promoting volunteerism and mobilisation of UN Volunteers.

**UNV should seek to play a stronger knowledge brokering role in the volunteer sector** by building on its recognised convening and leadership role in the sector, by strengthening relevant research, evidence and knowledge generating capacities in the organisation.

**UNV should develop a dissemination, outreach and usage strategy** for knowledge production in order to maximise efforts and achieve greater impact. This would involve adequately measuring outreach and uptake of knowledge products through appropriate monitoring efforts and indicators.

## Cross-cutting issues

### Recommendation 7 – Gender, inclusion and South-South cooperation (based on conclusion 7)

**UNV should conduct more granular analysis of issues affecting gender discrimination and social inclusion** as part of the SF development process, to improve UNV’s understanding of how discrimination dynamics work and to inform future strategies not to perpetuate them.

**UNV should maintain efforts to ensure gender parity at a global and regional level**; providing concerted efforts to address current regional disparities and disparities across different volunteer modalities that may be contributing to perpetuate discriminatory dynamics.

### Recommendation 8 – enabling environment for future SF (based on conclusion 8)

**UNV should be ambitious in the next SF.** The current positive environment for volunteerism, extending from COVID-19 and aligned with the 2030 Agenda, coupled with the renewed recognition on the part of Member States on the value of volunteerism, are generating valuable evidence on the importance



of volunteer action for bringing about transformative change, in responding to and recovering from crisis and for the achievement of the SDGs.

**UNV, and its key constituencies, should take advantage of this context to further promote volunteerism and the role of UN Volunteers in crisis responses;** strengthening and expanding the use of the Online Volunteer modality, where global

travel restrictions remain in place, as this modality is highly relevant in responding to the evolving situation with COVID-19 and aligns well to the UN future of work agenda UNV should identify further opportunities to respond through innovative practice and special initiatives. Given the improved financial and organisational health, and increasing relevance of volunteerism, UNV is in a strong position to respond to this call.

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