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UNFPA – Evaluation

United Nations Population Fund

**Formative evaluation of the UNFPA engagement
in the reform of the United Nations development system**

Summary

The Evaluation Office conducted this formative evaluation as part of the UNFPA quadrennial budgeted evaluation plan, 2022-2025. Covering the period from January 2017 to May 2022, the evaluation assessed the contribution of UNFPA to the reform of the United Nations development system as well as the effects of the reform on UNFPA at global, regional and country levels.

The first of its kind in the United Nations development system, the formative evaluation generated important findings, conclusions and recommendations. It is intended to support accountability for past and present performance and inform the further engagement of UNFPA in the reform.

I. Background

1. Recognizing that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development called for bold changes to the United Nations development system (UNDS), the Secretary General of the United Nations offered his vision on the required reform in his reports of 11 July and 21 December 2017 to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The proposed reform was then mandated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in resolution 72/279 of 31 May 2018.
2. The reform of the UNDS aims at providing a more coherent, accountable and effective support to help Member States achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More specifically, the reform should deliver a reinvigorated resident coordinator system; clear and more robust lines of accountability; a reinvigorated resident coordinator system; a more coherent and better coordinated utilization of regional capacities and resources; a new generation of United Nations country teams (UNCTs); more adequate support infrastructure at global, regional and country levels; a shift in donor funding towards more predictable and flexible resources; streamlined operating practices through consolidation of back offices and service centres, resulting in both efficiency gains and higher-quality services and better communication on what the UNDS does.
3. Several years into the repositioning of the UNDS, several pieces of the reform have been finalized, including the Management and Accountability Framework (MAF); the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) guidance; the business operations strategy guidance; the review of the UNDS regional assets; and the review of the multi-country resident coordinator offices and the funding compact

II. The purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation

4. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to help UNFPA provide more effective support to the further development and operationalization of the reform of the UNDS while ensuring that the reform is also conducive to delivering on the three transformative results¹ that UNFPA is committed to achieving by 2030.
5. The objectives of the evaluation were as follows:
 - (a) Assess the contribution of UNFPA to the design, development and the operationalization of the reform (including how UNFPA has adapted to the reform);
 - (b) Analyse the effects of the reform on the strategic positioning, the ability to deliver, and the organizational structure and institutional efficiency of UNFPA;
 - (c) Assess the extent to which UNFPA has been able to leverage the reform to accelerate the achievement of the transformative results and the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action;
 - (d) Draw lessons and good practices from the engagement of UNFPA in the reform and formulate recommendations on how UNFPA can contribute more effectively to the operationalization of the reform while benefiting better from the effects of the reform.
6. The evaluation covered the contribution of UNFPA to the reform as well as the effects of the reform on UNFPA at global, regional and country levels. It covered the period from January 2017 to the end of data collection in May 2022. The focus of the evaluation, however, was on the period after the approval of General Assembly resolution 72/279 in May 2018

III. Evaluation methodology

7. The evaluation methodology followed a mixed multi-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, including a desk review of documentation, the analysis of internal and external data sets, key informant interviews and two online validation surveys. Due to the travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all data collection work was conducted remotely.

¹ The three transformative results are: (a) ending preventable maternal deaths; (b) ending unmet need for family planning; and (c) ending gender-based violence and harmful practices, including female genital mutilation and child marriage.

8. Triangulation of data was ensured through systematic cross-checking of evidence from different sources and by applying different data analysis methods.
9. Over 113 key stakeholders were interviewed at the headquarters and regional levels (56 and 57 stakeholders, respectively). Detailed studies were undertaken in 10 countries, with 153 key stakeholders interviewed. Over 200 documents were reviewed from UNFPA, United Nations and external sources.

IV. Conclusions

Conclusion 1. UNFPA support for repositioning the United Nations development system has stood out throughout the design, development and operationalization of the reform elements. All levels of the organization have engaged actively to advance the reform, including by being constructively critical when appropriate.

10. Working in over 150 countries, UNFPA had a strong rationale for engaging in the core reform elements of reinvigorating the role of the resident coordinator system, establishing a new generation of UNCTs, and increasing system-wide efficiency. The nature of its mandate has required close collaboration with other partners, especially other United Nations entities. Even before the start of this phase of the reform, the engagement of UNFPA with the long-running reform efforts was significant. UNFPA support has gone beyond what would be required for the organization to benefit from the reform and includes supporting the broader UNDS and efforts of the system to support achievement of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

11. Understanding the need for the reform, UNFPA has provided major support for the UNDS at all levels. For an agency of its size, despite recent limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has strongly engaged in the architecture and operationalization of the reform, from United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) task forces through regional issue-based coalitions to results groups at the country level. It has also played a major role in promoting some of the cross-cutting issues that are vitally important for the UNDS, areas such as gender, youth and, very importantly, in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda, making sure no one is left behind. Notably, the organization rapidly aligned many UNFPA corporate processes and systems in core areas of UNDS reform.

12. The organization's approach to engagement in UNDS reform has largely been appreciated at all levels and UNFPA has generally been seen as an important partner in the process. This does not mean that it has not provided criticism to proposals, when considered necessary, but it has done so in a constructive manner.

13. Leadership has been a critical factor. At the global level, the approach of the Executive Director and clear messaging has been essential in high-level engagement as well as in guiding the rest of the organization. The two Deputy Executive Directors, for management and for programme, have at different moments provided senior-level support for the process and led some key stages of the process. At the regional level, it was found that regional directors themselves have set the right tone and, similarly, UNFPA representatives have been leading changes at the country level.

Conclusion 2. The engagement of UNFPA in reforming the United Nations development system has helped to advance the repositioning processes. In the context of uneven progress in implementing the reform, UNFPA has also, for the most part, been able to capitalize on the reform for the benefit of its stakeholders and beneficiaries.

14. For the large part, UNDS reform has strengthened UNFPA, which is positive for the organization's stakeholders and beneficiaries. Engagement in the reform has helped to emphasize the strategic positioning of UNFPA; it is making the organization more effective and efficient to deliver on its mandate and strategic plans. The reformed UNDS, including independent resident coordinators, common country analyses and cooperation frameworks, and inter-agency groups at country and regional levels, has provided an enabling environment for UNFPA to position its strategic priorities and leverage joint programming for results. Furthermore, application of the principle of mutual recognition and participation in the business operations strategy are clearly helping the organization to generate efficiencies.

15. It is clear that the main benefits for UNFPA are at the country level but the contribution is at all three levels. UNFPA headquarters, which drives engagement with the reform agenda, has made a large contribution but, as would be expected, it does not directly experience the benefits from the reform in the same way. Similarly at the regional level, where the purpose of UNDS reform is to create mechanisms aimed at making a difference for the country level. Capturing the benefits at the country level and communicating them to the regional and headquarters levels is crucial if the momentum of the reform is to be maintained.

16. However, UNFPA is not yet able to rely on certain reform elements because they are still under development or implementation. This is notably the case in terms of system-wide support for its country offices in policy and technical matters from the regional level; the local shared service centres for better quality business services; and UN INFO and system-wide evaluations at country and regional levels for demonstrating accountability and for supporting evidence-based learning and decision-making. In particular, the UNSDG information management system and UN INFO cannot be considered by UNFPA as a 'one-stop shop' repository for information on the operationalization of the different elements of UNDS reform

Conclusion 3. Although UNFPA has benefited from the reform of the United Nations development system and is likely to continue to do so, engagement does come with costs as well as risks. While benefits may outweigh them, efforts need to be made to reduce the costs and manage the risks.

17. Benefits for UNFPA have largely come about thanks to UNFPA senior management leadership and the strong engagement of UNFPA staff, and a sense of team spirit among agencies. However, engagement has placed a high burden on UNFPA staff involved in the different dedicated reform processes and mechanisms, often without such tasks having been factored in as part of formal performance expectations. Moreover, corporate measures (such as an internal policy on how to prepare for and handle career transitions and lay-offs) are not in place to respond to staff concerns in connection with the ongoing operationalization of UNDS reform and especially the potential implications of the efficiency agenda on jobs and career paths.

18. Although corporate processes are already in place for human resources planning in connection with UNFPA country programme development and approval (which should derive from cooperation frameworks), UNFPA has hardly seized the opportunity of UNDS reform to systematically review and reconfigure its presence at the country level and in the context of multi-country programmes.

19. Some of the heaviest opportunity costs are felt in the context of multi-country offices. With one UNFPA representative and the country office staff dealing with multiple resident coordinators and UNCTs, these contexts present special challenges for UNFPA engagement in operationalizing the reform. The costs of coordination are significant in such contexts and inevitably mean less time for supporting programmes and, subsequently, achieving better results.

20. To better manage the costs, UNFPA needs to prioritize its engagement where it is making the greatest difference in terms of either its own goals or through support to the UNDS. This may not be in co-chairing a large number of issue-based coalitions or results groups but possibly through more informal approaches to collaboration in the spirit of the reform.

21. UNFPA engagement with UNDS reform also includes a number of risks. For example, while full engagement in the efficiency agenda through using services provided by other members of the UNDS is commendable, there is a risk concerning the reliability and quality of services provided. A second example concerns funding the resident coordinator offices and the possibility that underfunding could result in extra work for UNCT members that may fall disproportionately on the smaller offices. Other examples include possible delays in finalizing UNSDCFs or the risk of UNSDCFs not including critical language for UNFPA to undertake the work required to fulfil its mandate.

Conclusion 4. While UNFPA has strongly engaged in the reform of the United Nations development system, the organization has not provided an explicit strategy for engagement to maximize the benefits nor has it consistently internalized the elements in its policies, strategies and guidance in order to ensure broad ownership and application across the whole organization.

22. Although UNFPA senior management has placed great emphasis on the reform with the message reemphasized at the regional and country levels, the lack of an overall engagement strategy may reduce

the opportunities to benefit from the reform and manage both its costs and risks. Moreover, not all reform elements are fully integrated in corporate strategies, policies and guidance.

23. Working arrangements and organizational structures have not been conducive to wide ownership of the reform. Not all business units and not all staff see that they have a role to play in engaging with the reform, and this contributes to missed opportunities. This is a special issue when dealing with the humanitarian work of UNFPA.

24. UNFPA played an active role in the review of the multi-country offices and, like other entities of the UNDS, its management came forward with specific commitments to scale up tailored support in the Caribbean and Pacific subregions. However, UNFPA has not taken full advantage of the opportunity provided by the multi-country office review to redefine the way it works in such environments, including to address the significant challenges of subregional offices having to engage with multiple – and increasing numbers of – resident coordinators and UNCTs. Neither the organizational structure nor the skills mix and alignment had been fundamentally reconsidered at the time of data collection of this evaluation. However, the evaluation team has been informed that UNFPA is currently redefining the way it works in multi-country office contexts but the fruits of these efforts are not yet fully apparent

Conclusion 5. Internal communications and working arrangements have facilitated the positive corporate approach to engagement in the reform of the United Nations development system but have not been able to integrate the spirit of the reform in the everyday work of all staff.

25. The current phase of the reform has been described as the most ambitious and comprehensive change process of the United Nations development system in decades. While the UNFPA strategic plan highlights the need to end “business as usual” and while UNFPA has indeed been a strong and constructive partner from the beginning of the reform endeavour, UNDS reform has not been addressed in all its ongoing elements and across the whole organization.

26. In his report to the General Assembly in 2022 on implementing the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR), the Secretary-General noted that “we must continue our efforts to ensure the reform of the United Nations development system brings about the changes in behaviour, culture and mindsets that can maximize the collective offer of the United Nations². This is also valid for UNFPA where, despite extensive efforts, not all staff have adequate knowledge of the reform or understand how they can use the spirit of the reform to fulfil the mandate of UNFPA or achieve the broader SDGs.

27. In addition to broadening ownership of UNDS reform, now is the time for UNFPA to focus on addressing the culture of the organization in terms of individual behaviours and all staff working in the spirit of the reform. This conclusion, as well as the previous one, is consistent with the 2021 Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) study on UNDS reform, where it was suggested that the UNDS needs to move from building the architecture of reform (“construction”) to building ownership of sustainable change at every level (“behaviour”).

Conclusion 6. Given the nature of the reform of the United Nations development system, it is clear that further strengthening of UNFPA contributions to the reform process, as well as maximizing the organization’s benefits from the reform, require a collective effort of the wider system.

28. As noted in conclusion 1, UNFPA has been heavily engaged in the UNDS reform and has led some key stages of the process. However, as a medium-sized agency and one of 37 members of the UNSDG chaired by the Deputy Secretary-General on behalf of the Secretary-General, it depends on the openness and capacities of others. The evaluation found a number of areas where deepening the reform would benefit UNFPA and, potentially, the broader UNDS.

29. For example, an inter-agency review of the indicators and an increase in the level of data disaggregation for the UNSDG information management system questionnaires under the current QCPR cycle would reduce the burden on UNFPA for collecting UNDS reform-related data, improve continuity of data tracking, and avoid data inconsistencies for better value from data. UNFPA would also benefit from a system-level effort to promote a more effective and efficient management of UNDS reform-related data, including through data interoperability.

² A/77/69 - E/2022/47

30. A second example relates to reducing and avoiding potential further increases in coordination costs for UNFPA at the expense of its programme, and to increase the added value of the resident coordinator system. As such, UNFPA would benefit from a clearer division of labour between resident coordinator offices and United Nations agencies for coordinating and implementing UNDS reform processes and mechanisms at the country level, in the context of the broadly formulated MAF. Additionally, the UNSDCF configuration exercise should also include the tailoring of resident coordinator office support to the needs of specific UNCTs.

31. Thirdly, as a service recipient, and for more efficient and effective programme delivery, UNFPA would benefit from further work on operationalizing (including monitoring) the standardized client satisfaction principles. More attention should be paid to the quality aspect of services delivered by suppliers through bilateral initiatives, the business operations strategy and especially the shared service centres, because of their long-term structural implications for UNFPA.

V. Recommendations

32. The following recommendations follow logically from the six conclusions above. In formulating the recommendations, an attempt has been made to focus on issues that are relevant at a high strategic level rather than on details of UNFPA engagement with specific areas of UNDS reform. Specifically, the recommendations are aimed at strengthening UNFPA engagement in UNDS reform, including to help ensure that the organization optimizes its benefits from the reform.

33. The six recommendations below take into account discussions with the evaluation reference group and benefited also from engagement with the senior management of UNFPA

Recommendation 1. UNFPA should provide stronger strategic direction for its workforce within the framework of its strategic plan for its engagement with the United Nations development system reform.

34. To ensure a comprehensive and results-oriented approach to its engagement in UNDS reform, and within the framework of the UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2022-2025, UNFPA should develop an explicit strategy for UNFPA engagement in UNDS reform. This strategy should not imply that UNFPA has not embraced or integrated principles of the reform into its programme of work and strategic plans, but rather attempt to further deepen the implementation of the reform. Specifically, the strategy should aim to:

- (a) Ensure wide consultations across all elements of the UNDS reform to facilitate and enhance operationalization of the strategy;
- (b) Explain how UNFPA will further contribute to the reform and set out the actions to be undertaken to maximize the benefits from the reform and manage the associated costs and risks (including those set out in this set of recommendations);
- (c) Ensure actions will result in UNDS reform being mainstreamed throughout the organization;
- (d) Link the strategy to the change management process set out in recommendation 2.

35. In connection with the above, and to anchor the engagement strategy in the UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2022-2025, UNFPA should examine, within the context of the upcoming midterm review of the current strategic plan, whether UNDS reform should be considered an accelerator for achievement of the outputs of the strategic plan, and, accordingly, use the midterm review as an opportunity to reflect on this issue.

36. UNFPA should review the body of strategies and policies across the organization to ensure consistency with UNDS reform and address gaps, where necessary, to strengthen the organization's contributions to the reform process and maximize the benefits it reaps from the reform.

Recommendation 2. UNFPA should work towards broadening the ownership and deepening the institutionalization and internalization of the reform of the United Nations development system at all levels of the organization.

37. To broaden familiarity with and ownership of UNDS reform across the whole organization, UNFPA should establish a formal change management process, tailored to different groups, which encourages change in the understanding and mindsets of staff. The process should include the following elements:

- (a) Reviewing UNFPA working arrangement regarding reform implementation;
- (b) Addressing communications and capacity strengthening about the reform;
- (c) Introducing methods to monitor change, such as broad staff surveys.

38. To better institutionalize UNDS reform (and linked to the strategy for engagement in UNDS reform outlined in recommendation 1), UNFPA should examine and adapt, as necessary, the roles and responsibilities of different UNFPA business units, including the Humanitarian Office, and relevant internal working arrangements, most importantly the inter-divisional working group on United Nations reform.

39. To better internalize UNDS reform, UNFPA should strengthen its internal communication of the reform, including with additional practical examples of good practices from within UNFPA or other United Nations agencies that could be replicated in similar contexts and across regions or adapted to fit UNFPA needs.

Recommendation 3. UNFPA should address human resource challenges arising from the reform of the United Nations development system and incentivize more staff to work in collaboration with their colleagues from other United Nations agencies.

40. To help UNFPA staff better manage workloads related to dedicated UNDS reform processes and mechanisms and engage even better within UNDS reform, while avoiding staff dissatisfaction, UNFPA should ensure that responsibilities are planned, acknowledged and accounted for in the individual staff performance appraisal and development (PAD) system – at all levels of the organization.

41. Going beyond dedicated UNDS reform processes and mechanisms –to broaden ownership of the reform within the organization and achieve more United Nations system-wide coherence – UNFPA should prepare guidance on using the PAD system to incentivize and recognize staff who collaborate with and leverage other United Nations agencies to achieve their work objectives, including for work across the development-humanitarian-peace continuum.

42. As a service recipient, UNFPA should ensure that the concerns of its operations staff about potential negative implications of the transition to shared service centres on jobs and career paths are reflected in the final UNSDG human resource transition strategy, followed by the development and dissemination of internal UNFPA guidance and related tools.

Recommendation 4. UNFPA should address United Nations development system reform-related challenges and risks for its programme work.

43. To clarify and further improve the derivation of the priorities of UNFPA country programme documents from cooperation frameworks, the organization should continue working with the inter-agency working group on programme development and results and adapt and make better use of its internal quality assurance mechanisms.

44. To better leverage United Nations partner organizations and other development partners, UNFPA should adapt further corporate guidance and support mechanisms, including at the regional level, for inclusion of relevant transformative results indicators across the UNSDCF and for generating the necessary monitoring data across UNFPA key areas of work, in line with programme country needs.

45. In light of budget shortfalls for the resident coordinator system in recent years and the state of the global economy, UNFPA should ensure an effective management of associated risks for and, as a consequence, potential constraints on UNFPA programmes.

46. In a situation of uncertainty regarding shared service centres and to avoid disruptions and ensure the sustainability of administrative and financial services for achieving the transformative results, UNFPA should ensure an effective management of the risks the organization is exposed to by advancing implementation of the efficiency agenda, especially the transition to shared service centres, in terms of reliability, costs and quality of services.

Recommendation 5. UNFPA should re-assess the way it works in multi-country environments to deliver impact and accelerate the implementation of the commitments made to the multi-country office review.

47. In order to best position UNFPA to achieve the transformative results and implement the Samoa Pathway priorities in countries and territories serviced by multi-country offices, UNFPA should reflect on and define principles for engagement with programme country governments and UNCTs in such environments, clearly stating the level of ambition for the organization. Starting with the Pacific and the Caribbean, the process should:

- (a) Engage UNFPA staff in subregional offices, regional offices and include targeted consultations with the Development Coordination Office and the UNDS, in particular those United Nations agencies with similar footprints, as well as Member States;
- (b) Guide subregional offices on how to engage and prioritize engagement with the plurality of inter-agency coordination mechanisms in these multi-country settings;
- (c) Explore the possibility of linking with existing (or creating a new) communities of practice or networks of technical staff with expertise on small island developing States that can be drawn upon, as needed;
- (d) Factor UNSDCFs and multi-country programme commitments into strategic thinking around the composition, organization, footprint and resourcing of the subregional offices;
- (e) Support regional offices in guiding the subregions in implementing the principles for engagement.

48. To ensure that both UNFPA and the UNDS fulfil their commitments resulting from the multi-country office review as well as to manage the expectations of Member States, UNFPA should do its part to accelerate the commitments made to the review. To this end UNFPA should:

- (a) Support the Development Coordination Office to build further on the workstream on Action Area 3 (Strengthened and more visible policy and technical resources) and, in unison with other United Nations agencies, explore improved and feasible support to countries;
- (b) Plan for an internal discussion on the entity-specific commitments made by the organization to identify the bottlenecks and accelerate progress, or amend these commitments, as necessary.

49. UNFPA should capitalize on the experience and lessons learned from a new way of working in multi-country environments to explore benefits for other situations where UNFPA staff are dealing with multiple programme countries and UNCTs (e.g., in the Indian Ocean subregion).

Recommendation 6. UNFPA should make special efforts to ensure that those working in humanitarian contexts make best use of the reform of the United Nations development system, especially to use the reform in working with partners across the development-humanitarian-peace continuum.

50. To ensure broader ownership and better integration of the UNDS reform in humanitarian work and contexts, UNFPA should:

- (a) Encourage more active participation of the Humanitarian Office in discussions on UNDS reform, including in the context of the MAF (e.g., by ensuring that Humanitarian Office colleagues fully participate in consultations on the UNDS reform as well as in discussions on reform integration and its implications in humanitarian settings);
- (b) Develop better internal communication of the implications of UNDS reform for UNFPA humanitarian operations as well as for its development work in humanitarian settings, reflecting both challenges and opportunities.
- (c) Undertake a better integration of UNDS reform into UNFPA humanitarian guidance and policy documents.