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UNFPA – Evaluation

United Nations Population Fund

Independent evaluation of the capacity of UNFPA in humanitarian action, 2019-2025

The Independent Evaluation Office conducted this evaluation as part of the UNFPA multi-year costed evaluation plan, 2024-2027. Covering the period 2019-2025, the evaluation assessed the evolution of the capacity of UNFPA to prepare for and respond to humanitarian crises. The evaluation came at a pivotal time, providing valuable lessons to inform the future humanitarian action of UNFPA, particularly in the context of the new UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2026-2029 and the ongoing “humanitarian reset.”

I. Background

1. The period under assessment was marked by an increase in the number, scale and complexity of humanitarian crises, driven by escalating conflicts, the deepening climate crisis and major natural disasters. Reflecting its increasing commitment and operational scale, humanitarian funding grew to represent over 40 per cent of UNFPA non-core resources by late 2024. However, in early 2025, substantial funding shortfalls caused significant operational challenges, including for UNFPA.
2. Within this turbulent environment, UNFPA has continued to build on its position as a double-mandate entity. Key milestones include establishing the Humanitarian Office in 2019, reorganizing it as the Humanitarian Response Division (HRD) in 2022, and relocating it to Geneva.
3. In response to the changing environment, and as part of an ongoing and continuous process of adaptation to new and emerging challenges, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) initiated a “humanitarian reset,” complemented by the UN80 system-wide reform initiative. UNFPA engaged in the humanitarian reset process to contribute to its successful outcome while ensuring that UNFPA key areas of work are maintained. Meanwhile, UNFPA also launched an internal ‘business model review’ to enhance its effectiveness and efficiency, including in humanitarian response.

II. Purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation

4. This evaluation serves the dual purposes of accountability and learning. It aims to assess how UNFPA capacity to prepare for and respond to emergencies has evolved since the previous evaluation carried out in 2019, and to draw lessons that inform future humanitarian action, particularly in the context of the next Strategic Plan and the ongoing “humanitarian reset.”
5. The evaluation assesses the relevance of UNFPA humanitarian programming; the efficiency of its internal systems; the effectiveness and coverage of its interventions; the integration of humanitarian principles and standards; and its ability to strengthen resilience across the humanitarian-development-peace continuum.
6. The evaluation is global in its geographical dimension, covering all countries and regions with UNFPA humanitarian activity. Thematically, it encompasses all humanitarian strategies and programmes. The temporal scope covers the period from 2019 to 2025.
7. The primary intended users include the UNFPA Executive Board, the Humanitarian Response Division and other UNFPA headquarters business units, and regional and country offices. Findings are also relevant to partners, donors and other United Nations organizations.

III. Evaluation methodology

8. The evaluation adheres to internationally recognized standards from the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), the OECD Development Assistance Committee, and Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian (ALNAP). It is framed by eight evaluation questions and a reconstructed theory of change that links UNFPA humanitarian actions to its transformative results.
9. A mixed-methods approach was employed to gather comprehensive qualitative and quantitative evidence to ensure robust and triangulated findings.

10. Tools included an in-depth document review of over 1,500 documents; remote and in-person interviews with 243 stakeholders; and focus group discussions with 200 community members and rights-holders.

11. A multistage sampling process selected 15 countries for the evaluation, with six countries chosen for in-person field visits and nine for desk reviews and remote interviews to ensure representation across diverse humanitarian contexts.

12. Qualitative data was systematically coded and analysed, leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance content analysis while adhering to strict ethical guidelines. The most significant limitation was the volatile context created by the 2025 funding crisis, which challenged the long-term relevance of findings; the team sought to “future-proof” its recommendations by considering future projections.

IV. Conclusions

Conclusion 1: UNFPA has a clear commitment to addressing the needs of women, girls, youth and vulnerable people within its mandate, although this is not fully operationally reflected. Its strategic positioning as a global humanitarian actor is being consolidated but not yet fully established.

13. There is a growing recognition, both internally and externally, of humanitarian work as a core and essential part of the UNFPA mission. This reflects the organization’s deep-seated mandate alignment, which is increasingly visible in the strategic integration of humanitarian action into country-level planning. This evolution demonstrates a deliberate and positive adaptation to changing contexts and a stronger alignment with both national priorities and the broader United Nations frameworks.

14. The organization has made progress in professionalizing its humanitarian function by producing a growing body of dedicated policies, processes and guidance. The establishment of the Humanitarian Response Division and the development of the 2025 Emergency Policies and Procedures are landmark achievements. These efforts serve to enhance UNFPA credibility and systematically build its capacity for a more effective and standardized humanitarian action across all levels.

15. At the field level, UNFPA country programmes demonstrate clear progress in integrating humanitarian action into their core work. They have shown considerable agility in adapting to rapidly evolving and complex crises, from sudden-onset disasters to protracted conflicts. This operational flexibility and alignment with local contexts is an indication to the growing institutionalization of the dual mandate of UNFPA.

16. However, the absence of a stand-alone global humanitarian strategy presents a nuanced challenge that occasionally impedes the potential for greater strategic engagement and consistent prioritization across the organization. While humanitarian action is integrated into the corporate strategic plan, the absence of a stand-alone strategy may lead to inconsistent advocacy for mandate areas like sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and gender-based violence (GBV) as life-saving interventions.

17. While the strategic focus on ‘accountability to affected populations’ has been sharpened at a corporate level, its operational application on the ground remains a developing area and can be ad hoc. The inconsistent implementation of feedback mechanisms limits the systematic direct responsiveness of programmes to the specific, articulated needs of communities. This creates a gap between strategic intent and the consistent, field-level practice required for truly community-led responses.

Conclusion 2: UNFPA humanitarian interventions have demonstrated considerable positive progress in the coordination and delivery of high-quality sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and gender-based violence (GBV) services, although the overall global growth in humanitarian resources has not been fully matched by a commensurate expansion in the number of people reached with SRH services.

18. UNFPA has successfully rolled out, supported and institutionalized high-quality, evidence-based service models that are central to its mandate in humanitarian settings. Key interventions, such as the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for SRH in crisis situations, mobile clinics, and the provision of essential commodities and dignity kits, have become hallmarks of its response. This focus on quality has strengthened the technical integrity of its programming and its reputation among partners.

19. The fact that the number of people reached with SRH services has remained static overall since 2018 can be explained by a strategic shift towards enhancing the quality and integration of programming, rather than focusing solely on expanding the quantity of beneficiaries. UNFPA has increasingly prioritized programmatic depth, delivering core SRHR and GBV services in a complementary manner. Consequently, many rights-holders now benefit from multiple services rather than just a single intervention. While this integrated, high-quality approach is more resource-intensive per person, it strengthens programmatic synergies, improves access for affected populations and enhances the overall holistic approach of the humanitarian response.

20. There has been progress in advancing youth engagement and leadership in humanitarian contexts through strategic initiatives like the Youth Compact and the Youth, Peace and Security agenda. By championing these platforms, UNFPA has successfully mobilized substantial peacebuilding funds and supported concrete country-level actions. These efforts have empowered young people, including those with disabilities, and have effectively addressed critical issues such as child marriage. However, the overall effectiveness of youth-focused humanitarian programming is sometimes hampered by a lack of coordination between the youth-focused initiatives, primarily managed by the Programme Division, and the work on youth in humanitarian settings, which is managed within the Humanitarian Response Division.

21. UNFPA has made progress in improving the quality and integration of its services, creating a strong foundation for effective humanitarian response. The primary strategic priority is now to scale up programmes to meet the vast and escalating needs on the ground. Given the scale of the humanitarian needs globally, the services provided or supported by UNFPA clearly only represent a fraction of what is required. In the current constrained funding environment, this calls for innovative partnerships and more strategic and targeted resource allocation to extend the reach of these essential services to the most vulnerable populations.

Conclusion 3: Humanitarian data efforts by UNFPA – both population data and programming data – have informed some positive advancements in policies and innovations but remain fragmented and inconsistent, limiting evidence-based decision-making and the ability to demonstrate programmatic impact.

22. As a globally recognized leader in population data and demographics, UNFPA possesses a strong and unique foundational expertise that, when applied, enhances the evidence base for humanitarian action. This core capacity provides a distinct comparative advantage within the humanitarian system. It allows UNFPA to contribute critical demographic analysis for planning, needs assessments and targeting that few other actors can provide.

23. UNFPA humanitarian data efforts have successfully informed positive advancements in the development of key organizational policies, innovative tools and overarching strategic frameworks. Initiatives like the COVID-19 Population Vulnerability Dashboard and the explicit inclusion of data as a strategic accelerator demonstrate a growing corporate commitment. This has helped position data as a critical enabler for a more effective and targeted humanitarian action.

24. At the field level, UNFPA country offices often demonstrate capacity and initiative by developing diverse tools for data collection and visualization. This creates a rich internal ecosystem of practical, context-

specific solutions that respond directly to operational needs. This bottom-up innovation highlights the technical skill and adaptability present across the organization.

25. Despite this progress, internal systems for compiling, analysing and sharing humanitarian data often lack the cohesion and organization-wide consistency needed for robust, real-time decision-making. This also impedes the capacity of UNFPA to consistently demonstrate the results of its work on the health and welfare of the populations it serves – an increasing imperative in the current landscape of humanitarian assistance. Resources and staff capacity can sometimes focus too much on fulfilling a heavy burden of administrative reporting for donors and corporate platforms. This focus can overshadow the potential for genuine, integrated and coherent monitoring that drives adaptive programming and organizational learning.

26. In addition, the unique expertise and well-established relationships of UNFPA with national statistical offices and other data actors are not always systematically or sufficiently leveraged for dynamic humanitarian preparedness and detailed operational planning. This represents a nuanced, missed opportunity that is partly attributable to interdivisional disconnects between the humanitarian and population data functions within the organization. A more integrated approach could enhance the timeliness and granularity of data available for response.

Conclusion 4: UNFPA humanitarian operational efficiency has improved since 2019, with some key organizational, strategic and policy advancements, notably the creation of the Humanitarian Response Division (HRD), ongoing development of a dedicated body of policies, processes and guidance, and improvements in the management of short-term staffing arrangements. However, the pace of progress is slow, and has been compromised by systemic internal fragmentation and bottlenecks.

27. There have been improvements in humanitarian operational efficiency, driven by key organizational, strategic and policy advancements since 2019. The creation of the Humanitarian Response Division and the ongoing development of a dedicated body of policies, processes, and guidance have been pivotal. These changes have professionalized the humanitarian function and enhanced the ability of UNFPA to respond.

28. UNFPA has successfully increased its adoption of cost-effective and agile programming modalities, most notably cash and voucher assistance. This modality has demonstrated a more effective approach over traditional in-kind supply delivery. This shift empowers beneficiaries and strengthens local markets while improving programmatic efficiency.

29. UNFPA is increasingly establishing itself as a more credible and effective humanitarian actor through deliberate strategic restructuring and the strengthening of its rapid deployment mechanisms. New policies, such as the Emergency Response Policies and Procedures, have introduced specific and valuable operational efficiencies in terms of time and cost. This demonstrates a clear and positive trajectory in bolstering the organization's response capacity.

30. Despite these strategic improvements, persistent delays are still observed in the humanitarian supply chain, alongside slow and often cumbersome human resources recruitment processes. These operational challenges can impact on the timeliness of response at the field level, occasionally creating a gap between strategic intent and operational reality. While efficiencies have been introduced, they are not yet consistently seen in all contexts.

31. The organization's heavy reliance on short-term, earmarked funding for both programming and critical staff positions creates a state of instability that impedes sustained staffing and programming continuity. The widespread “double-hatting” of staff and an over-reliance on limited-capacity, short-term deployment mechanisms like the Global Emergency (Surge) Roster or the Global Emergency Response Team (GERT) can hinder UNFPA capacity. This prevents the development of a fully agile and predictable humanitarian response.

Conclusion 5: UNFPA humanitarian programming demonstrates strong internal coherence and improved external complementarity for SRHR and GBV but faces challenges in integrating youth and data while navigating intensifying inter-agency competition.

32. The internal coherence of UNFPA humanitarian response has been enhanced, especially through the improved and intentional integration of SRHR and GBV services at country level. This integrated approach improves effectiveness through programmatic synergies. It ensures that survivors and affected populations can access a more holistic and seamless range of support through coordinated entry points.

33. Externally, UNFPA has solidified its position as a credible and respected humanitarian actor within the international system. It has successfully fostered critical partnerships, engaged in impactful joint programming and demonstrated clear leadership in cross-cutting areas like protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. This is increasingly important in the challenging and evolving global humanitarian environment.

34. UNFPA has successfully enhanced its external complementarity by fostering partnerships and engaging in joint programming across the United Nations system, which is crucial for reducing gaps and avoiding duplication. By working closely with agencies like the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), UNFPA maximizes its reach and impact. This collaborative spirit is essential for delivering effective and coordinated assistance in complex emergencies.

35. However, the overall coherence of the humanitarian work of UNFPA is somewhat hampered by the continued weak holistic integration for its youth and population data programming. These critical mandate areas largely remain in Programme Division, separate from core humanitarian action structures. This fragmentation prevents the full leveraging of UNFPA comprehensive expertise and limits the potential for more deeply integrated and impactful responses.

36. The internal fragmentation, coupled with intensifying external competition and mandate overlap, presents a complex and evolving challenge that threatens the established coordination and leadership roles of UNFPA. The ongoing “humanitarian reset” and reforms to the cluster system require clear and assertive strategic positioning. Without this, there is a risk that the hard-won leadership of UNFPA in areas like GBV coordination could be diluted.

Conclusion 6: UNFPA humanitarian action demonstrates improving conceptual and programmatic links to preparedness and longer-term development and peace processes, yet corporate guidance gaps on implementation and localization challenges persist.

37. The integration of the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) continuum is increasingly and clearly evident, from UNFPA corporate strategic plans to concrete country-level operations. This is demonstrated through strategies like government systems strengthening and anticipatory action. This commitment helps to ensure that immediate life-saving interventions also contribute to long-term, sustainable outcomes.

38. In line with its ‘Grand Bargain’ commitments, UNFPA has strengthened its localization efforts through an increase in funding allocated to national and women-led organizations. It has also enhanced coordination and capacity-sharing with local partners. This aims to embed the humanitarian response within local structures for greater ownership and sustained impact.

39. UNFPA is effectively building resilience among affected communities through the strategic use of innovative and forward-looking strategies. The increasing application of government and civil society systems strengthening, anticipatory action for predictable crises, and the use of cash and voucher assistance

are powerful tools. These approaches bridge the gap between immediate relief and longer-term development, tangibly demonstrating a commitment to the HDP continuum.

40. While corporate commitment to the HDP continuum and climate adaptation is clear, the operationalization of these approaches has been affected by a lack of consistent, practical corporate guidance. This has led to some inconsistent interventions and a degree of staff uncertainty at the country level.

41. Despite clear progress in directing more funds to local partners, challenges remain in fostering truly equitable partnerships and ensuring the stability and sustainability of local organizations. The reliance on short-term, project-based funding cycles can undermine the ability of local partners to build long-term capacity and financial resilience. This dynamic can unintentionally hinder the full realization of a truly localized and partner-led response.

V. Recommendations

42. To ensure relevance and actionability, the following recommendations take into account consultations held with the UNEG, as well as senior management, while maintaining independence.

Recommendation 1: UNFPA should elevate its strategic and leadership role in humanitarian action by developing a dedicated humanitarian strategy to unify its internal approaches and strengthen its external positioning. This will ensure its mandate areas are consistently prioritized as life-saving interventions and solidify its leadership role amidst intensifying inter-agency competition and the ongoing global humanitarian reform.

Key actions:

43. Develop and publish a comprehensive stand-alone strategic framework for humanitarian action that clearly states and defines the enhanced humanitarian role and mandate areas of UNFPA and reflects the life-saving nature of SRHR, GBV and population data in an integrated HDP continuum approach that cuts across all UNFPA work.

44. Reinforce and require internal capacity for robust advocacy and leadership on humanitarian programming among country representatives, deputy representatives, and senior management in inter-agency fora, particularly concerning resource negotiations.

Recommendation 2: UNFPA should focus on sustaining and coordinating targeted, high-impact sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and gender-based violence (GBV) services by strategically directing resources to the most vulnerable populations with the highest unmet needs. This focused approach will safeguard its coordination leadership and reinforce its credibility, even as overall service coverage remains a challenge in a resource-constrained environment.

Key actions:

45. Undertake a strategic prioritization and resource allocation exercise to identify and target services for the most vulnerable crisis-affected populations.

46. Strategically review the UNFPA position as provider of last resort in GBV, as the relevance of this role, the responsibilities that it entails and how UNFPA can meet these are changing in the context of the humanitarian reset and the UN80 reforms.

47. Support a coherent transition of the GBV Area of Responsibility from its IASC-mandated role to maintain UNFPA coordination leadership.

Recommendation 3: UNFPA should enhance its operational agility and responsiveness by revising policies, optimizing supply-chain management and addressing processes that slow down timely humanitarian action. To sustain this improvement, UNFPA should strategically invest in its people by streamlining recruitment processes, reducing the overreliance on short-term contracts, and building a stable and expert humanitarian workforce.

Key actions:

48. General policies and procedures, i.e. notably for human resources, supplies and workplan management, should be revised to be more flexible, allowing for timely adaptations and responses to protracted humanitarian crises, providing clear guidance for rapid programming and administrative measures outside of sudden-onset emergencies.
49. Develop clear and practical guidance on operationalizing risk appetite and ‘no regrets’ policies, including risk sharing (with donors and other agencies) and the systematic quantification of risk.
50. Undertake a review exercise of the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of both the Surge and GERT mechanisms.
51. Assess, identify and target strategic investments in prepositioning humanitarian supplies at global, regional and national levels, tailored to the most significant identified risks and needs and the most cost-effective locations. Consider introducing pre-approved thresholds for local procurement and linking clearly to the Emergency Policies and Procedures ‘no-regrets’ approach.
52. Increase the proportion (though not necessarily the absolute levels of funding, given the current resource constraints) of core funding allocated to strategic humanitarian positions at country and regional levels, providing stability and continuity for critical roles. This includes adequate capacities, at regional office and headquarters levels, for staff to be deployed to a crisis in the first days and weeks until positions are filled by colleagues with long-term contracts.
53. Assess and streamline recruitment processes for humanitarian positions, exploring mechanisms for rapid hiring, such as pre-vetted national rosters and adoption of the ‘time-to-fill’ metric that tracks the overall recruitment process.

Recommendation 4: UNFPA should enhance its accountability to affected populations and deepen its localization efforts by systematically integrating community feedback mechanisms and participatory decision-making throughout the entire humanitarian programme cycle. This shift from ad-hoc application to a consistent, required practice will ensure programming is better aligned with community needs and builds genuine, equitable partnerships with local actors.

Key actions:

54. Integrate consistent ‘accountability to affected populations’ mechanisms, including improved staff capacity and accountability, feedback loops and community consultations, into every stage of the humanitarian programme cycle and partner assessments and contracts, including indicators related to progress on both the presence and quality of these ‘accountability to affected populations’ measures.
55. Leverage innovative technologies (mobile platforms and other remote technologies) for community feedback and clearly defined needs assessments, where appropriate and contextually sensitive.
56. Move beyond mere funding allocation to local partners by investing in genuine co-design and inclusive and participatory decision-making processes, such as involvement in development of programming proposals, boosting their participation and/or leadership in coordination roles, in line with the 2025 “Guidance note to operationalize UNFPA humanitarian localization commitments.” This should recognize

local organizations as true partners with added value beyond service delivery for the most effective and immediate response in emergencies – and clarify risks that this entails, including risk sharing with donors.

Recommendation 5: UNFPA should integrate and strengthen its work across the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) continuum by clarifying responsibilities and fostering collaboration between its humanitarian response and programme divisions to break down internal silos. This requires finalizing and disseminating comprehensive corporate guidance on the HDP continuum, climate adaptation and the Youth, Peace and Security agenda to ensure a cohesive, effective, and resilient approach in humanitarian crises.

Key actions:

57. Clarify the division of responsibilities and foster collaboration between the Humanitarian Response Division (HRD) and the Programme Division (PD), with support from the Division of Human Resources (DHR) and the Supply Chain Management Unit (SCMU), including by modifying corporate structures that create silos between development and humanitarian interventions, for example, consideration of moving HRD under the Deputy Executive Director (Programme).
58. Finalize and widely disseminate a comprehensive corporate framework and practical guidance on the HDP continuum, including lessons learned and best practices, operational procedures, funding strategies and data responsibilities.
59. Develop a dedicated framework and guidance for humanitarian actions on climate adaptation as part of disaster risk reduction.

Recommendation 6: UNFPA should develop a unified humanitarian data strategy and system for outcome measurement for SRHR and GBV in humanitarian settings. To maximize the key ‘learning’ function of monitoring and the ability to leverage all data, UNFPA should invest in consistent, disaggregated data and analysis and related platforms to clearly ascertain its contribution to SRHR and GBV outcomes.

Key actions:

60. Follow up on the recommendations of the 2021 baseline and evaluability assessment on the generation, provision and utilization of data in humanitarian assistance, which proposed key building blocks for the development of a theory of change for the work of UNFPA in the field of humanitarian data.
61. Develop and implement meaningful standardized, outcome-oriented indicators for SRHR and GBV programming, moving beyond activity and output-level data to measure changes in well-being, health-seeking behaviour, reductions in GBV exposure/risks and the long-term benefits of cash and voucher assistance, among others.
62. Streamline humanitarian reporting requirements to reduce administrative burdens and reorient efforts towards genuine monitoring, in-depth analysis and organizational learning.
