**Executive Board of the
United Nations Development
Programme, the United Nations
Population Fund and the United
Nations Office for Project Services**

**Annual session 2024**
3 to 7 June 2024, New York
Item 10 of the provisional agenda
**Evaluation**

# Annual report on evaluation, 2023

*Summary*

The annual report on evaluation presents the evaluation activities undertaken in 2023 by UNDP, the United Nations Capital Development Fund and the United Nations Volunteers programme. The report provides a summary of the evaluation-related work of UNDP and lessons learned from evaluations and the Reflections series. The report documents the efforts of UNDP in strengthening decentralized evaluations compared to the previous year and the progress in improving the quality of decentralized evaluations. It also presents the progress on ongoing enhancements to the knowledge management system of the Independent Evaluation Office. The leadership and contributions of the Independent Evaluation Office to syntheses of evaluations related to the Sustainable Development Goals are highlighted.

*Elements of a decision*

The Executive Board may wish to: (a) take note of the annual report on evaluation; and (b) request UNDP management to address the issues raised.

Please recycle

# I.  Introduction

## A. Overview

1.  This report presents the activities undertaken by the Independent Evaluation Office in 2023 as part of its strategy and multi-year workplan for 2021-2025. The workplan is anchored in a shared understanding of the need to explore innovative ways to enhance organizational learning, decision-making and accountability processes, in line with the overarching priority to transform UNDP into a more agile and forward-thinking organization.

2.  In 2023, consistent with its mandate, the Independent Evaluation Office continued to contribute to the performance of the oversight and accountability functions of UNDP. Further to the regular implementation of its multi-year programme of work, the Office conducted three thematic evaluations and 12 independent country programme evaluations. These evaluations generated valuable insights and recommendations to strengthen the performance of UNDP at both the country and global levels.

3.  The Independent Evaluation Office also extended its oversight and support to strengthen capacities for decentralized evaluations, collaborating closely with the Bureau of Policy and Programme Support and regional bureaux. In particular, in 2023 the Office conducted in-person training across all five UNDP operating regions to improve the quality of evaluations.

4.  In 2023, the Office prioritized updates to its knowledge management systems, both internal and external. This included work on the Evaluation Resource Centre, which is the main repository, containing over 6,000 UNDP evaluations. The Office launched and made significant improvements to Artificial Intelligence for Development Analytics 2.0 (AIDA), a platform which harnesses the power of artificial intelligence to access evidence and rapidly gain insights from UNDP evaluations. The Office launched a new communications strategy focusing on social media engagement to reach a wider audience and promote access to UNDP evaluation products.

5.  The Office supported the global synthesis of Sustainable Development Goal-related evaluations, in collaboration with other United Nations agencies and wider stakeholders, by co-leading the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition and by serving as its secretariat. The Office released two new *Reflections* papers and the second book in the *Reflections* series, encapsulating lessons learned from UNDP support in key areas.

6.  In line with the UNDP evaluation policy, the Independent Evaluation Office began implementing its regional strategy in 2023. The policy includes the appointment of regional evaluation advisers. Recruitment is under way, with expectations of having three onboarded before mid-2024.

7.  Lastly, the Office underwent a leadership transition, welcoming a new Director in September 2023.

## B.  Engagement with the Executive Board

8.  The Office maintained regular interaction with the Executive Board through a combination of formal and informal discussions. In 2023, the Office shared with Member States its annual report on evaluation for 2022 along with three thematic evaluations: (a) a formative evaluation of and the integration by UNDP of the principles of leaving no one behind; (b) an evaluation of UNDP support to social protection; and (c) an evaluation of UNDP support to access to justice.

9.  In addition, the Independent Evaluation Office shared 13 independent country programme evaluations which inter alia were intended to inform the Board's decision-making ahead of its consideration of the renewal of these 13 country programmes.[1]

## C. Engagement with UNDP senior management

10. In 2023, the Independent Evaluation Office continued its engagement with UNDP management including the Executive Group, particularly concerning thematic and strategic evaluations, country programme evaluations and decentralized evaluations. The Office organized feedback sessions and individual meetings with various bureaux and senior managers to share and deliberate on the findings and recommendations from the thematic evaluations. These interactive sessions are designed to strengthen dialogue between the Independent Evaluation Office and UNDP senior management, providing valuable feedback to inform UNDP programming and operations.

11. The Independent Evaluation Office established an engagement and communication unit in the Director's office at the end of 2023. The unit aims to enhance the utilization of evaluations and knowledge products and contribute to organizational learning. The new team ensures that evaluation messages reach the right audiences through the appropriate channels; and contributes to dialogue with UNDP management and staff around evaluation findings, lessons learned and recommendations.

12. The Office's network of regional focal points has continued to collaborate closely with UNDP management to enhance oversight and provide technical support to improve the planning, quality and coverage of decentralized evaluations. The regional focal points supported the Programme Appraisal Committee review process, where draft country programme documents are assessed against programming quality standards. This involvement ensures that planning documents incorporate recommendations from evaluations.

## D. Advisory bodies

13. During three meetings in 2023, the Independent Evaluation Office engaged with the Audit and Evaluation Advisory Committee to solicit its guidance on ways to strengthen the independence, credibility and effectiveness of the evaluation function, and to share updates on its work and progress made.

14. The Evaluation Advisory Panel continued advising the Independent Evaluation Office, providing support to methods and reviewing draft evaluation reports. In addition, all evaluations conducted by the Office underwent a peer review process by thematic and country-level experts, hired individually or sourced from research centres and think tanks. Their input contributed to strengthening the evaluations.

## II.   Independent Evaluation Office key outputs, 2023

### A.  Overview

15. Consistent with Executive Board decision 2017/21, the Independent Evaluation Office aims to ensure comprehensive evaluation coverage of all aspects of the UNDP mandate. As part of its multi-year programme of work 2022-2025, the Office initiated three global thematic evaluations in 2023:

   (a) The evaluation of UNDP support to digitalization of public services, which assessed the role and contribution of UNDP in promoting digital transformation, and its

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[1] Benin, Burundi, Equatorial Guinea, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo (Africa); Bhutan, Cambodia and Philippines (Asia and the Pacific); programme of assistance to the Palestinian people (Arab States).

preparedness in enabling digital systems and transformation at the country level. The evaluation covered the period from 2015 to 2023;

(b) The evaluation of UNDP support to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation, which assessed support for protection, restoration and sustainable use of ecosystems and the conservation of biological diversity. The evaluation covered the period from 2018 to 2023;

(c) The evaluation of UNDP engagement with the private sector for structural transformation examined the results achieved by the organization and its partners at macro, meso and downstream levels. The evaluation covered the period from 2014 to 2022.

16. The digitalization evaluation was presented to the Executive Board at the first regular session 2024, with the other two evaluations planned to be presented to the Board during its annual session 2024.

17. Notably, two of the evaluations, namely digitalization and private sector engagement, are strategic enablers identified by UNDP to accelerate the achievement of development results.

18. The Independent Evaluation Office conducted 12 independent country programme evaluations, covering three regions. The Office also shared with the Board the 13 evaluations conducted in 2022. Most independent programme evaluations conducted in 2023 covered the African and Arab States regions (see table 1).

**Table 1**
**Independent country programme evaluations, 2023**

| Region | Evaluations |
|---|---|
| **Africa*** | Democratic Republic of the Congo |
| | Liberia |
| | Madagascar |
| | Mali |
| | Rwanda |
| **Arab States** | Djibouti |
| | Iraq |
| | Syrian Arab Republic** |
| | Yemen |
| **Asia and the Pacific** | - |
| **Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States** | - |
| **Latin America and the Caribbean** | Colombia |
| | Cuba |
| | Paraguay |

\* The independent country programme evaluation for the Congo was deferred to 2025 owing to the extension of the country programme by two years.
\*\* Postponed due to the emergency response following the major earthquakes that struck northwestern Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye in February 2023.

19. In response to decision 2020/15, in which the Board requested concise and aggregated evaluation evidence, the Independent Evaluation Office continues to advance its commitment towards a culture of organizational learning that draws on evaluative evidence. The Office continued its synthesis work, extracting lessons from previous evaluations and

identifying what works and what does not, and sharing it with UNDP and the broader development community. In 2023, the Office launched three *Reflections* papers addressing environmental justice, localization of the Sustainable Development Goals and support to health systems through the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Additionally, the 2022 *Reflections* book, comprising 11 papers published over the last two years and covering a diversity of topics of UNDP programme engagement, was launched in 2023 and presented in an interactive webinar to UNDP and United Nations staff.

20. Two regional syntheses were developed in collaboration with the Regional Bureaux for Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia and the Pacific. These covered issues related to country office implementation capacities (Latin America and the Caribbean) and climate action (Asia and the Pacific) and were designed to serve as inputs to regional programming and policy priorities. Both of these synthesis reports will be completed in 2024.

21. The Independent Evaluation Office contributed to joint United Nations system-wide synthesis and collaborated with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the United Nations Children's Fund the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Food Programme (WFP) to produce a synthesis of United Nations system evaluations of progress under Sustainable Development Goal 5, titled "Are we getting there?". The synthesis report generated recommendations to accelerate progress towards Goal 5, mapped existing evidence and identified gaps across the Goal's nine targets. The Office also became a member of the steering committee for the joint evaluation of the Goal 3 Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-Being.

22. The Independent Evaluation Office remains an active member of the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition steering committee, contributing to the planning of the final evaluation of the global COVID-19 response throughout 2023. The final report, due in 2024, will examine both multilateral and bilateral efforts and philanthropic actions in response to the pandemic, and include country case studies conducted by partner Governments. The Coalition is also assessing the vaccine roll-out.

## B. Key findings from country programme evaluations

23. This section provides a synthesis of the key highlights and findings from country programme evaluations completed in 2023. These include the country programme evaluations in Burundi, Djibouti, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Paraguay and Rwanda. The findings are organized according to the signature solutions of the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2022-2025.

**Signature solution 1: Poverty and inequality**

24. UNDP support to enhancing economic opportunities and social protection, using tailored interventions and strategic partnerships, contributed to local economic development, strengthening micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and promoting entrepreneurship. Programmes on self-employment and entrepreneurship were strategically aligned with labour market trends, particularly in environments where private sector employment opportunities were scarce. Collaborative efforts with other agencies, for example, the programme for the autonomy of women and protection of the rights of women and girls in Djibouti contributed to expanding their economic opportunities. The short-term focus of UNDP support to employment and livelihoods meant that structural challenges of entrepreneurship development could not be addressed (Burundi, Djibouti, Lesotho). There is scope for UNDP to be more strategic in support to employment generation and economic development in the least developed countries. Evaluations indicate that UNDP engagement in these countries can be further strengthened to address challenges to boosting production, developing the private sector and strengthening their capacities to use trade benefits effectively. Although some of the least developed countries have the fastest growing economies, they lag on other parameters, viz., income, the Human Assets Index and the Environmental Vulnerability Index. Addressing these constraints calls for balancing short-term efforts with more strategic support to address structural constraints.

**Signature solution 2:  Governance**

25.   A range of governance areas was supported across countries, including access to justice, public administration capacities, electoral support and civil society engagement. UNDP contributed to enhancing social cohesion and improving justice and security services systems and processes. Notable accomplishments included: strengthening electronic voting in Paraguay, enhancing governance frameworks and justice services in Madagascar and implementing innovative justice solutions in Rwanda. In conflict contexts, such as in Mali, UNDP played an important role in strengthening government institutions and supporting electoral processes. Political instability and contextual factors notwithstanding, there was a greater focus on addressing the immediate need for institutional capacity. While UNDP demonstrated timeliness and responsiveness to the reform agenda, in some cases it limited its contribution by not adequately leveraging such engagement for the longer term (Burundi, Djibouti, Lesotho, Mali).

**Signature solution 3: Resilience**

26.   While limited funding affected the sustainability of progress made, the UNDP integrated approach and collaborative partnerships contributed to fostering resilience and mitigating crises. UNDP contributed to conflict prevention, community peace and social cohesion in Djibouti and Mali. Innovative projects such as the e-court system in Rwanda demonstrated adaptability to emerging challenges in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and which helped increase access to justice. UNDP supported livelihood development and environmental sustainability to strengthen resilience against shocks like the pandemic.

27.   UNDP collaborated with relevant national partners to implement integrated approaches, contributing to enhancing community resilience against climate change effects and fostering private investment (Mali). Innovative platforms like 'Wendá' in Paraguay held the potential to enhance sustainable urban resilience by coordinating multisectoral actions and initiatives. These platforms empowered communities and tackled climate-resilience challenges. It is notable that UNDP research on reconciliation and resilience provided evidence-based insights, guiding targeted programming and policy development in Rwanda.

**Signature solution 4: Environment**

28. UNDP support to climate resilience and environmental information management systems played an important role in country programming, in particular using funding from the Global Environment Facility. UNDP initiatives were relevant to addressing key challenges in mobilizing communities to address land degradation issues (Lesotho, Paraguay). UNDP advocated for mainstreaming environmental concerns in national policies, leading to the revision and adoption of national environment strategies and plans (Lesotho, Rwanda). Notably, the UNDP commitment to institutional capacity development was evident through its focus on knowledge transfer, enabling relevant institutions to protect ecosystems threatened by deforestation and climate change, and regions facing significant land-use changes and social challenges (Paraguay). UNDP integrated programming approaches fostered catalytic processes for long-term changes, promoting sustainable urban development and biodiversity protection.

**Signature solution 5: Energy**

29.   UNDP contributed to institutional capacity-building, policy advocacy and community-level interventions in its efforts to promote clean, affordable energy, pursuing a more holistic approach to improving access through targeted interventions at policy and community levels (Madagascar) and capacity-building for technical staff and institutions responsible for energy management. UNDP support was critical in shaping national energy policies and strategies, aligning them with global commitments such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (Rwanda). Community-level interventions such as installation of solar power plants and distributing improved cookstoves enhanced access to clean energy, although the challenges related to financial sustainability and behaviour

change remain (Djibouti and Mali). UNDP contributed to expanding access to energy in underserved communities through developing national institutional capacities and installing solar power plants. Factors affecting the effectiveness and sustainability of UNDP programmes include limited financing and private sector engagement, as well as institutional instability at the national level. Cultivating private sector interest in renewable energy was difficult, partly reflecting a lack of government commitment to private sector engagement.

**Signature solution 6: Gender equality**

30. In line with its commitment to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, and despite policy and contextual challenges, UNDP contributed to strengthening institutional responses, such as improved national mechanisms for gender-disaggregated reporting systems (Djibouti), and increased political and economic empowerment of women (Paraguay). UNDP continued to champion the Gender Seal certification programme in both the public and private sectors, with tangible outcomes like gender-inclusive financial strategies (Rwanda). Through the Gender Seal programme, UNDP encouraged private sector institutions to prioritize gender equality in staff recruitment. UNDP-supported democratic governance interventions led to tangible outcomes, including higher representation of women at local levels (Rwanda).

31. UNDP did not fully prioritize gender-specific development and peace concerns that necessitated long-term solutions. Overall, the absence of sector-wide solutions and policy connections limited the UNDP contribution (Lesotho). The evaluations also underscore the importance of programmatic partnerships for more holistic gender-specific responses at the country level.

## B. Lessons from the *Reflections* series

32. This section presents lessons drawn from papers in the *Reflections* series on environmental justice; health system strengthening through the partnership between UNDP and the Global Fund; and localization of the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Environmental justice**

33. While legal protection is crucial for guaranteeing access to environmental justice, legal protection alone is not enough without proper enforcement. The support of communities, the involvement of customary institutions and the use of digital technology can significantly enhance enforcement efforts. More importantly, environmental issues require integration into the formal legal system.

34. Employing dispute-resolution skills that are culturally relevant, along with building trust, can lead to fairer justice outcomes at the community level. While both formal and informal environmental dispute-resolution mechanisms are important, support to informal mechanisms was more significant in enhancing community governance systems across several countries (Chile, China, Myanmar and Papua New Guinea).

**Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals**

35. Strengthening local government capacities was a key enabler in advancing progress towards the Goals at the local level. Interventions were more successful when they systematically helped local governments to increase transparency and build citizens' trust. UNDP support for local government mainly centred on enhancing skills in finance, budgeting, strategic planning, and technical areas crucial for tailoring development to specific issues (Bangladesh and Nepal). These initiatives significantly bolstered local resilience and capacities for localizing the Goals. In conflict-affected countries where UNDP has a strong rural reach, its support to municipalities helped to increase the trust of local populations and enhanced public oversight of revenue generation and local development planning (Afghanistan and areas affected by conflict in Colombia). While UNDP supported the strengthening of local government capacities in some regions, overall, there has been a decline in the support to this area.

**Health system strengthening**

36. Over the years, UNDP has emerged as a leader in implementing health programmes in challenging crisis contexts (including Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, South Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic). UNDP ensured that the investments made by the Global Fund are harmonized with early recovery efforts, contributing to the establishment of resilient health systems. In crisis or post-crisis countries, a blend of fiduciary controls and capacity development initiatives proved most effective in strengthening health systems and programmes. In countries where prolonged conflicts severely hindered the execution and sustainability of health service delivery, UNDP intervened to fill these critical gaps. In such contexts, UNDP reinstated technical capabilities, enhanced the skills of community health workers and served as a crucial support to communities. In collaboration with the Global Fund, UNDP facilitated the implementation of comprehensive health programmes in challenging circumstances, fostering the resilience of health and community systems and advocating for improved health-care accessibility.

## III. Oversight and support to decentralized evaluation.

### A. Investment in evaluation

37. Spending on decentralized evaluations declined in 2023 in line with the reduction of evaluations completed, with $23.04 million spent on evaluation. UNDP headquarters, bureaux and country offices had an expenditure of $8.46 million[2] on evaluation (down from $11.74 in 2022), staff costs of $11.75 million (up from $9.88 million in 2022), and additional evaluation-related costs of $2.83 million[3] (down from $4.21 million in 2022).

### B. Decentralized evaluation support

38. The Independent Evaluation Office continued to promote and support stronger decentralized evaluations, maintaining a close and continued dialogue with regional bureaux and country offices. The Office worked closely with the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support and the different regional bureaux on implementing the road map for strengthening decentralized evaluations, which was presented to the Executive Board in 2022. This included the presentation of progress against the road map at meetings with senior UNDP management throughout the year.

39. The Office also worked closely with the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support to ensure that its assistance was aligned with the regional support strategies for work with country offices to improve the planning, implementation and quality of evaluations. Strategic actions prioritized for 2023 included effective evaluation planning and the conduct of various types of evaluations (impact, thematic, programme, outcomes, portfolio, project and joint evaluations) by country offices; and improving the quality of evaluations through targeted actions addressing bottlenecks at the country level. Efforts also focused on strengthening evaluation capacity to leverage evaluation findings for informed decision-making, communication and advocacy. Despite progress in enhancing the quality of decentralized evaluations, particularly in the Arab States and Asia and Pacific regions, challenges persisted. These included: capacity constraints, inadequate staffing for evaluation, country-specific issues affecting evaluations and shifting priorities. The Independent Evaluation Office and Bureau for Policy and Programme Support will work with the regional bureaux to address these concerns through 2024.

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[2] Based on Evaluation Resource Centre data downloaded on 12 February 2024.

[3] Staff time allocations for evaluation and additional evaluation costs are self-reported through the results-oriented annual reports. Staff costs for evaluation are calculated by UNDP based on those self-reported figures.

40.    As part of the effort to raise the capacity of staff in UNDP offices, the Independent Evaluation Office and the regional bureaux convened six in-person regional workshops on evaluation in five regions, to update and refresh the skills of monitoring and evaluation and programme staff. The training focused on raising the quality of evaluations to ensure their credibility, reliability and greater usability in decision-making. The training also focused on improved planning to address the participation of stakeholders and partners in the evaluation process, and to ensure timely preparation and roll-out of evaluations. A total of 300 staff were trained through these workshops between May and October 2023

## C.    The implementation, quality and use of decentralized evaluations

41.    Of 456 decentralized evaluations planned for 2023, 63 per cent (289) were completed.[4] This is lower than 2022, when 73 per cent of planned evaluations (396) were completed. The Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific mostly met its planned targets, reaching 92 per cent completion rate, with more evaluations and a greater percentage completed in 2023 than 2022. Across other regions, there was a decline in the completion rate and number of evaluations planned between 2021/ 2022 and 2023 (see figure I).

**Figure I.  UNDP decentralized evaluations, 2020-2023**
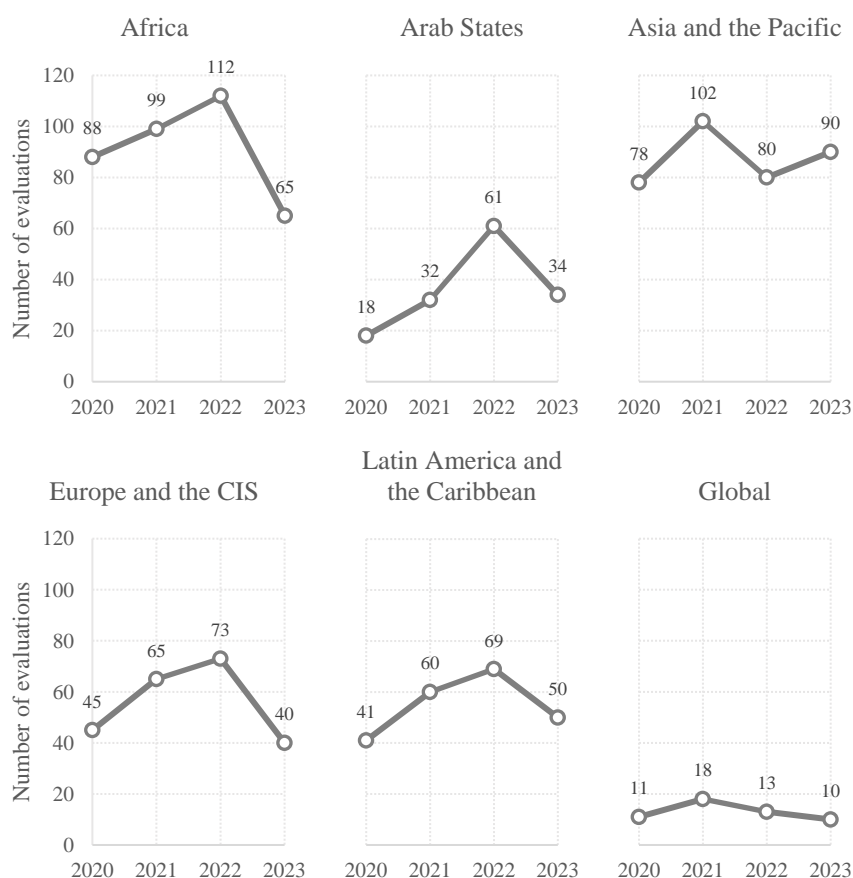


CIS = Commonwealth of Independent States
Source: UNDP Evaluation Resource Centre

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[4]  This data is from the Evaluation Resource Center. The data on planned evaluations is as of 15 April 2023, while the data on completed evaluations is as of 1 February 2024.

42. Quality assessment scores did not show any change over previous years. In 2023, of 218 evaluations quality assessed by the Independent Evaluation Office, 40 per cent were highly satisfactory or satisfactory, 48 per cent were moderately satisfactory and 12 per cent were moderately unsatisfactory.

43. The Independent Evaluation Office recognized high-quality evaluation across UNDP in April 2023 with the third Evaluation Excellence Awards. Six outstanding, gender-responsive and innovative evaluations from Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean, Libya, Bangladesh, Namibia and Yemen were recognized. The winners were chosen by the Evaluation Advisory Panel based on a quality of evidence-based analysis and utility for management decision-making.

## IV. Use of evaluations

### A. Utility of evaluation outputs

44. The Independent Evaluation Office conducted its annual survey to collect the perspectives of stakeholders on its work and the quality of its evaluation reports and publications. The survey findings showed that a significant number of respondents had consulted or read Independent Evaluation Office evaluative products, most often the independent country programme evaluations, thematic evaluations and capacity development products. More than one third of respondents also used the annual report on evaluation as a source of information. These products were assessed as useful, with more than three fourths of respondents "strongly satisfied" or "satisfied" with the utility of these resources (see figure II). In a year-to-year comparison, stakeholders' satisfaction has been consistently rising for corporate, thematic, synthesis evaluations and *Reflections* papers.

**Figure II.  Rates of satisfaction with the Independent Evaluation Office products, 2020-2023**

**Stakeholders were largely satisfied with their utility.**



Annual report on evaluation

Capacity development products

Corporate, thematic and synthesis

Country programme evaluations

*Reflections* series
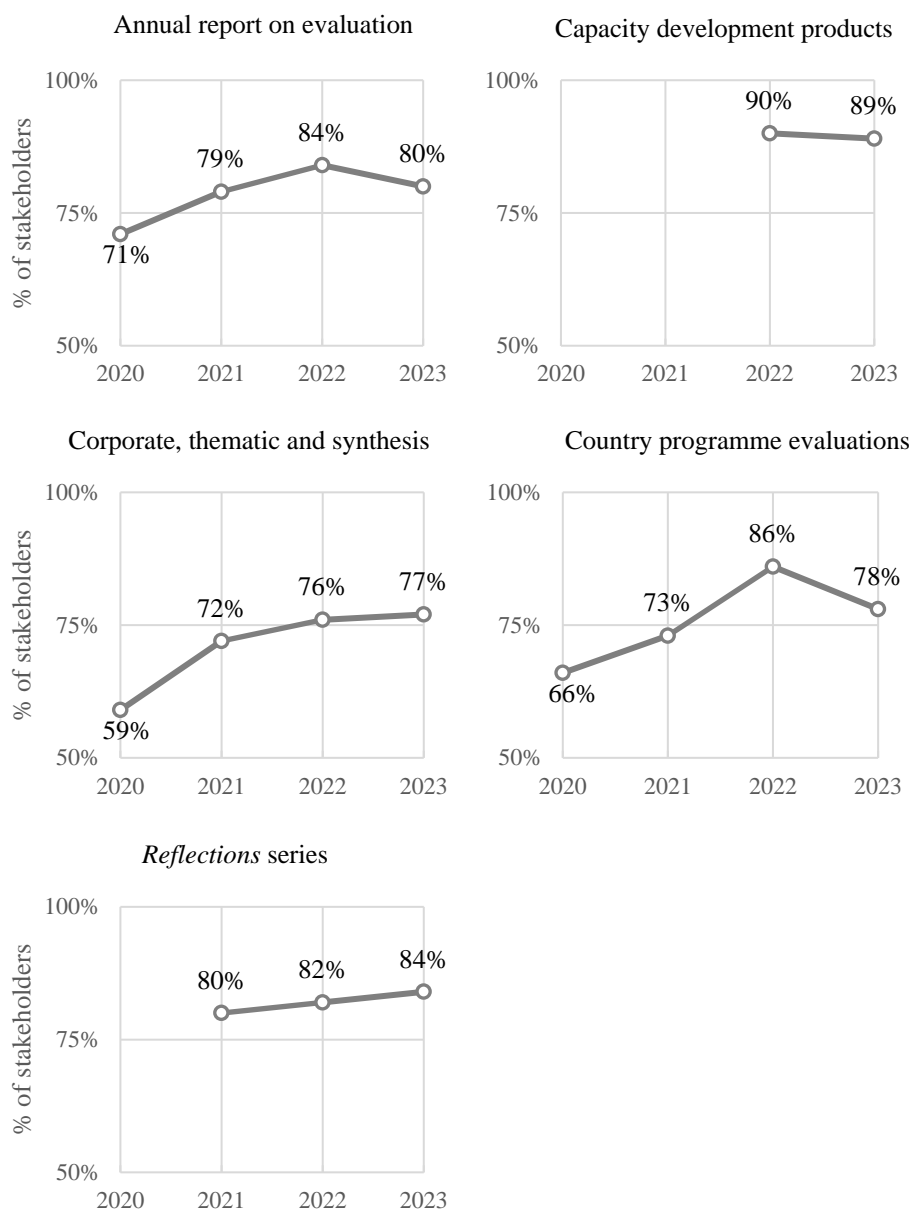
Source: Independent Evaluation Office, Stakeholder survey, 2020-2023

45.    The stakeholder survey also assessed the perception of stakeholders on the usefulness of Independent Evaluation Office recommendations. The survey findings show that between 67 per cent and 82 per cent of respondents were either "strongly satisfied" or "satisfied" with all aspects of the recommendations (figure III). The main perceived strength of the recommendations was their impartiality and clarity. This was consistent with the results for 2022.

46.    More than one third of respondents who indicated that they had read or consulted recommendations in the past year also reported that they had reflected them in their work,

especially in programme or project design, and in efforts to strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems. Stakeholders who carry out evaluations themselves often noted that Independent Evaluation Office recommendations were useful references for their own work.

**Figure III.    Stakeholders' rates of satisfaction and assessment of Independent Evaluation Office evaluation recommendations, 2023 and 2022-2023**
**Most survey respondents were satisfied with evaluation recommendations in 2023, though slightly less so than in 2022.**
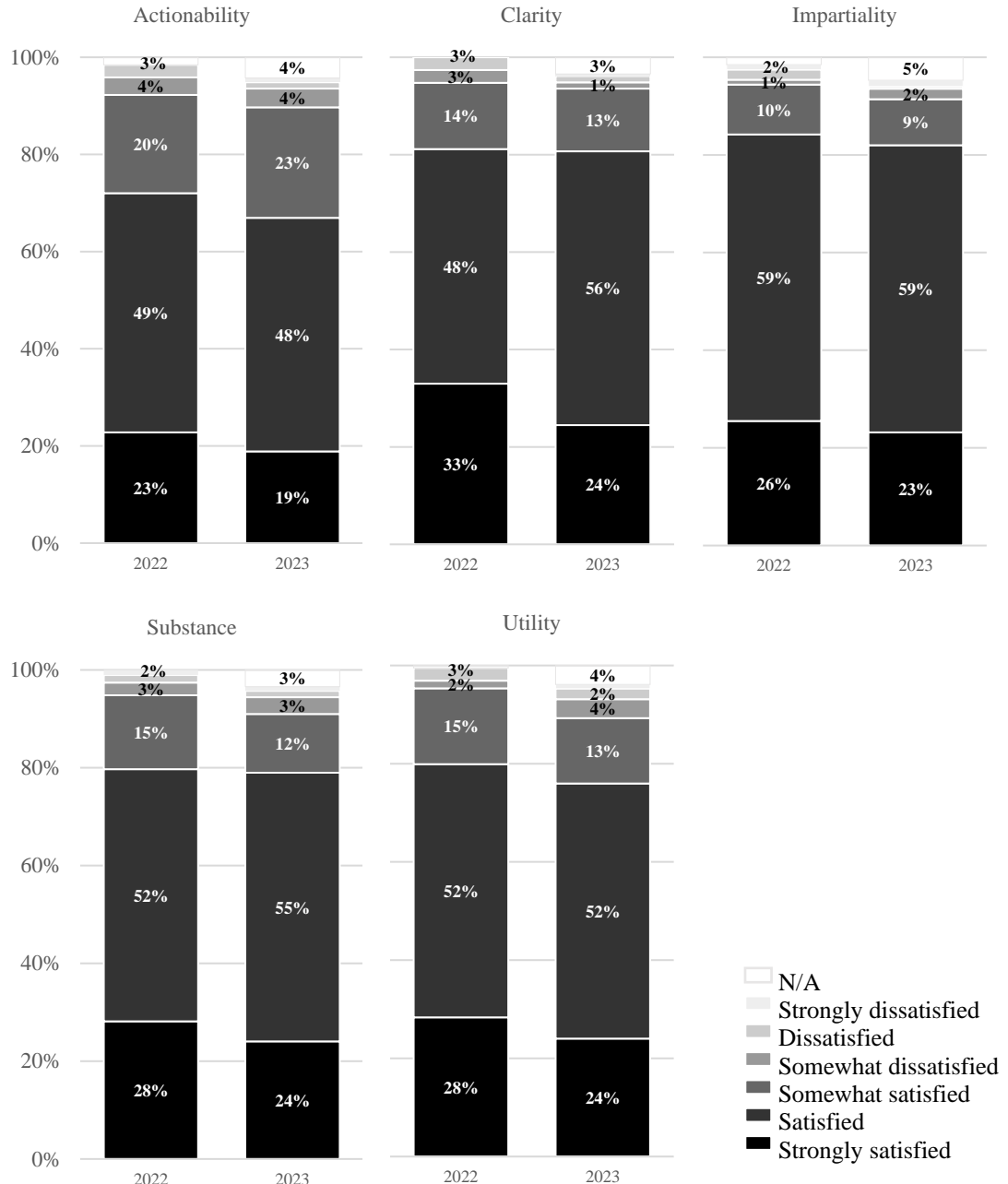


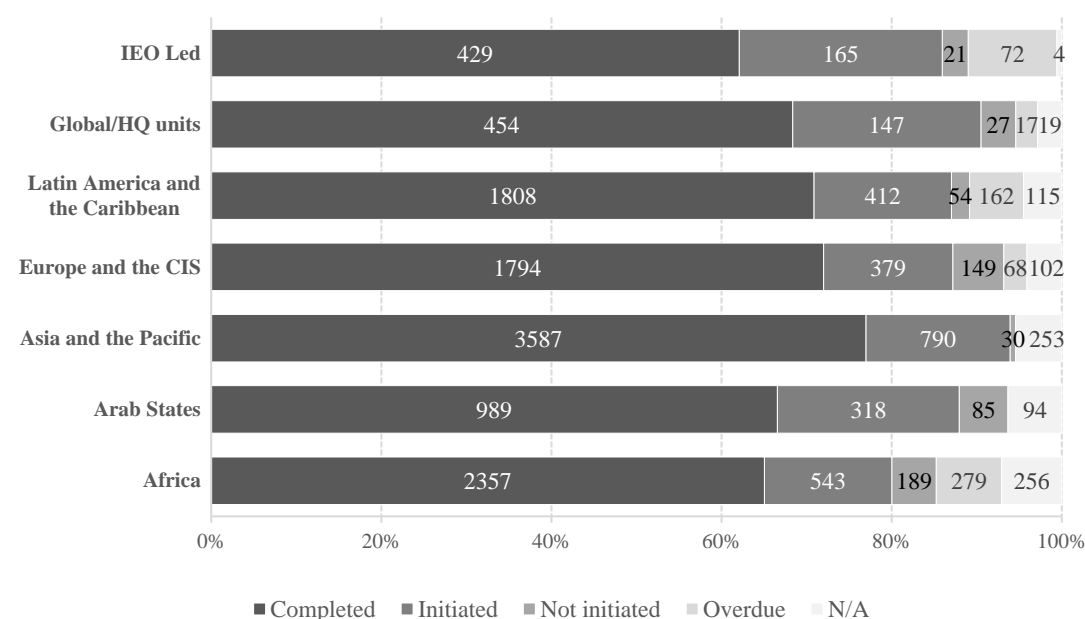Source: Independent Evaluation Office, Stakeholder survey, 2020-2023

## B.  Implementation of recommendations

47.  All evaluation recommendations were required to have management responses, indicating whether the evaluands accepted, partially accepted or rejected them. By the close of 2023, 85 per cent of all evaluations had posted a management response outlining how they would be taking the evaluations forward.

48.  The Evaluation Resource Centre recorded all key actions of management responses (figure IV), tracking their implementation as reported by the county offices. Overall, 88 per cent of key actions were completed or under initiation. Only 7 per cent were overdue or had yet to be initiated, while 5 per cent were no longer applicable due to changing contextual circumstances.

**Figure IV.  Rates of implementation of evaluation recommendations, 2023**
**The vast majority of recommendations were completed or initiated. Only a small percentage were overdue or not initiated.**



## V.  Advancing global evaluation culture and practice

### A.  National evaluation capacity development

49.  The Independent Evaluation Office organized the seventh National Evaluation Capacities Conference, held in Turin in October 2022, after which the Office and the Global Evaluation Initiative[5] continued the rich discussions online. Two virtual post-conference events attended by over 1,000 participants discussed elements of the Turin agenda and ways forward to strengthen national evaluation systems, including the gender- and climate-informed evaluation systems and the inclusion of youth in national evaluation processes. These efforts provided interim platforms to sustain the dialogue as countries continue to strengthen their national evaluation systems, maintaining momentum as both partners prepare for the next conference in 2024.

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[5]  A monitoring and evaluation capacity development initiative co-founded by the Independent Evaluation Office and the World Bank.

50.   The Independent Evaluation Office is a co-lead, along with the Evaluation Office of the World Bank, of the Global Evaluation Initiative, a multi-partner trust fund aimed at improving evaluation capacity in the Global South. One example of its work was in Bhutan, where the Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results ("CLEAR") supported the Government Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination and UNDP Bhutan to co-design the national monitoring and evaluation framework and strengthen institutional processes for planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, under the country's new national development plan. The Bhutan national monitoring and evaluation framework strategy and action plan priorities were developed and the draft strategy was endorsed by the Cabinet. UNDP Bhutan will continue to support the Government in the implementation of the national monitoring and evaluation framework.

## B.   The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition

51.   The Independent Evaluation Office maintained its leadership role in the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition, which expanded to include 45 United Nations entities, Member States, multilateral development banks, the private sector and civil society. The Coalition aims to synthesize evaluative evidence organized around the five pillars of the Sustainable Development Goals (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership). As the secretariat, UNDP helped steer the Coalition's efforts in helping identify key lessons and insights from existing evaluative evidence and making these readily available to stakeholders to inform and accelerate the achievement of the Goals.

52.   The launch of the first global synthesis on the partnership pillar, Sustainable Development Goal 17, funded by the Governments of Ireland and Spain, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, UNDP, UNFPA and WFP, marked a significant achievement. The lessons and insights generated by the synthesis were successfully presented at a side event at the 2023 SDG Summit held during the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023 (see below).

53.   Work began in 2023 to scope out a synthesis of the peace and people pillars, both set to be conducted collaboratively by United Nations agencies in 2024. The work on the peace pillar is expected to provide inputs for the United Nations Summit of the Future in September 2024.

54.   Moving forward, the Coalition is undergoing restructuring, encouraging other agencies to lead in Goal-related evaluation synthesis work and expanding partnerships with academic and other not-for-profit organizations. The Independent Evaluation Office is working with partners to create a more focused vision, which involves creating smaller, more specific evidence syntheses and setting up an artificial intelligence-enabled platform to expand readability, speed production and lower cost. The restructured coalition will have a streamlined governance structure with the secretarial duties (currently assumed by the Independent Evaluation Office) taken on by another body. The Coalition will work to secure more sustainable financing vehicles, recognizing the need for a sustainable model that can support the transformative work it aims to achieve.

**What works to accelerate progress on the partnership pillar of the Sustainable Development Goals: Based on the global synthesis on the partnership pillar**

**1**   Emphasizing principles of horizontal cooperation - including fair, equitable and trust-based international cooperation - is key for sustainable development. Partnerships are not sufficiently calibrated to enable least developed countries and lower-middle-income countries to benefit from global trade, finance and technology transfer, despite this being the foundation of Sustainable Development Goal 17.

| 2 | Partnership models, including South-South, North-South, public-private and trilateral arrangements, benefit from using principles of horizontal cooperation based on trust and aligned incentives in partnership design, funding modalities and governance. |
| --- | --- |
| 3 | Partnerships to unlock trade opportunities for lower-middle income countries and least developed countries and to support them to comply with regulatory standards in high-income countries could help increase their exports. |
| 4 | Tailored tax regimes can better enhance domestic capacities. While tax collection capacities have improved, official development assistance and strategic partnerships remain essential for limiting the negative consequences of the debt crisis, and for promoting sustainable economic growth and financial reform, especially for least developed countries. |
| 5 | Effective green technology adoption requires route-to-market analysis, investment de-risking, subsidy reform and green finance, underscoring the importance of tailored, context-specific interventions. |
| 6 | Successful digitization initiatives drive growth, often led by governments partnering with the private sector. |
| 7 | The principle of leaving no one behind is fundamental to all Sustainable Development Goals. However, the systemic inattention to equity in the design and implementation of Goal 17-related initiatives may lead to the further marginalization of those most likely to be left behind. |
| 8 | Comprehensive risk analysis, the utilization of disaggregated data and evaluative evidence, and the application of data science techniques for reporting on the progress of Goal 17 are essential elements to enhance the effective use of voluntary national reviews. |

## C.   The United Nations Evaluation Group and other partnerships

55.   The Independent Evaluation Office is an active member of the United Nations Evaluation Group, participating in several of the working groups and co-chairing two, namely the synthesis working group and the data and artificial intelligence working group. The Deputy Director of the Independent Evaluation Office serves as a member of the Group's Executive Steering Committee.

56.   As in previous years, the Independent Evaluation Office participated in the United Nations Evaluation Group's reporting on the System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. The Office fully incorporated the evaluation performance indicator of the Action Plan in its quality assessment system. An analysis of all 111 UNDP

evaluations quality checked by the 2023 cut-off date yielded a mean performance indicator score of 10.69, indicating that UNDP surpassed the requirements of the Action Plan for the fourth consecutive year The analysis also indicated considerable improvement in incorporating gender mainstreaming into both independent and decentralized evaluations.

57. As co-convener of the synthesis working group, the Independent Evaluation Office, together with the UNFPA Evaluation Office, organized a series of group discussions on different aspects of the synthesis process. The working group attended the What Works Global Summit in October 2023 and presented its activities on the principles of and methodological approaches to evaluation synthesis to the broader evidence synthesis community. Exchanges and learning from these internal and external discussions led the production of a guidance document on evaluation synthesis.

58. The Independent Evaluation Office also contributed to a new mapping exercise of United Nations Evaluation Group members' decentralized evaluation functions and provided required information on UNDP.

## VI. Knowledge management

59. In 2023, the Independent Evaluation Office continued to update its knowledge management systems, both internal and external. This included the Evaluation Resource Centre, which is the main repository for UNDP evaluations, containing over 6,000 evaluations. Improvements in the first phase focused on consolidating UNDP evaluation guidelines, tools and templates, the user-friendliness and search capabilities of the database, and the introduction of a methods centre with a detailed guide to the latest approaches, tools and methods for data analysis, and assessment of overarching themes. In the second phase, the Evaluation Resource Centre was made more accessible and open, with a global log-in feature. This allows all UNDP staff members to access data about the quality of evaluations. In addition, a module was added to record rating data for independent country programme evaluations. Quality assessment and rating data for these evaluations are valuable resources for organizational learning and decision-making at all levels of the organization. The Methodology Centre of the Independent Evaluation Office, dedicated to refining methodologies and approaches to evaluation, was also undergoing continuous improvement.

60. In September 2023, the Independent Evaluation Office launched an upgraded version of AIDA, its artificial intelligence platform, developed to make it easier to access and understand insights from UNDP evaluations. During the first phase of the project, the platform was set up and a data pipeline was created to extract evidence from evaluation reports. The new release of AIDA 2.0 incorporated features for translating texts from other languages to English, so as to widen the s evidence base. As about 20 per cent of UNDP evaluations are written in languages other than English, such as French and Spanish, adding translation features means that the AIDA evidence base now includes all evaluations in the Evaluation Resource Centre database, regardless of their original language. Moreover, custom sentiment analysis tools and insight generation models were developed to introduce artificial intelligence-driven analytical capabilities to the AIDA platform. These additions allowed AIDA to reveal hidden insights in the results of its searches, making its outputs easier to use and apply for those working in synthesis, evaluation and development.

61. The Independent Evaluation Office also launched an updated communications strategy. The Office aims to increase its online presence, particularly on platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn. Its social media accounts saw more engagement than those of peer evaluation offices, indicating the high quality and relevance of the content that is disseminated by the Office, which likely resonates with readers, prompting greater interaction. The consistent delivery of valuable content, even with less frequency, may have built trust and loyalty among the audience, contributing to higher engagement levels than peer evaluation offices.

# VII. Staffing and finances, 2023

## A.  Independent Evaluation Office staffing

62.    The Independent Evaluation Office structure continues to operate effectively. The Office maintains adequate gender parity and geographical representation to ensure that evaluations incorporated a diversity of perspectives. In 2023, the Office had a staffing complement of 32 staff positions, composed of 27 International Professionals and five General Service staff. In addition, 10 long-term consultants with International Professional service contracts were part of the team. The Office currently has eight vacancies across different levels and contractual modalities.

## B. Independent Evaluation Office budget

63.    The Independent Evaluation Office budget for 2023 was set at $13.77 million, of which the Office spent $11.27 million (91 per cent) on evaluations and other institutional activities.

**Table 2**
**UNDP evaluation resources**

|  | *2018* | *2019* | *2020* | *2021* | *2022* | *2023* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Independent Evaluation Office expenditures** | 8.7 | 10.9 | 11.2 | 11.4 | 11.8 | 13.77 |
| **Decentralized evaluations** | 13.3 | 14.8 | 14.5 | 16.4 | 25.1 | 23.04 |
| **Total resources UNDP evaluation function** | 22.0 | 25.7 | 25.7 | 27.8 | 36.9 | 36.81 |
| **Share of UNDP programme resources to evaluation** | 0.48 | 0.58 | 0.57 | 0.58 | 0.77 | 0.75 |

Source: Independent Evaluation Office calculations of UNDP utilization and decentralized evaluation budget data.

64.    In keeping with the UNDP evaluation policy stipulations and the approved integrated budget of the Strategic Plan,[6] the Office developed its 2024 work programme to utilize funding of $13.8 million.

## C.    Implementation of the multi-year workplan, 2024

65.    In 2024, the Independent Evaluation Office will conduct two corporate evaluations for presentation to the Executive Board in 2025 at its first regular and annual sessions. These evaluations will cover the development and organizational effectiveness of the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2022-2025.

66.    The Independent Evaluation Office will also present its 2024 annual report on evaluation at the annual session of 2025 (see table 3).

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[6]  DP/2021/29, para. 38 (d)

**Table 3**
**Independent Evaluation Office work to be presented to the Executive Board**
**in 2024 and /2025**

| *Session* | *Independent Evaluation Office report* |
|---|---|
| **Annual session 2024** | Annual report on evaluation (for information)<br>Evaluation of UNDP support to ecosystems management and biodiversity conservation (for decision)<br>Evaluation of UNDP engagement with the private sector (for decision) |
| **First regular session 2025** | Organizational effectiveness (for decision) |
| **Annual session 2025** | Annual report on evaluation (for information)<br>Evaluation of the UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (for decision) |

67. The Independent Evaluation Office will continue to honour its commitment to evaluate all UNDP country programmes reaching the end of their programme cycles through independent country programme evaluations. Their timely submission will enable the Executive Board to make informed decisions on the renewal of country programmes. Table 4 lists the evaluations to be conducted in 2024 (33 in number).

**Table 4**
**Independent country programme evaluations, 2024**

| *Region* | *Country* | |
|---|---|---|
| **Africa** | Côte d'Ivoire<br>Eswatini<br>Ethiopa | South Africa<br>South Sudan<br>Uganda |
| **Arab States** | Lebanon<br>Libya<br>Somalia | Sudan<br>Tunisia |
| **Asia and the Pacific** | China<br>Indonesia<br>Malaysia<br>Myanmar<br>Timor-Leste | |
| **Europe and the CIS** | Armenia<br>Azerbaijan<br>Belarus<br>Bosnia and Herzegovina<br>Georgia<br>Kazakhstan | Kosovo*<br>North Macedonia<br>Türkiye<br>Turkmenistan<br>Serbia<br>Uzbekistan |
| **Latin America and the Caribbean** | Argentina<br>Guatamela<br>Mexico<br>Panama<br>Uruguay | |

 * In the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

68. The Independent Evaluation Office will continue to produce the *Reflections* series and regional thematic syntheses. The Office will contribute to the peace and pillar and people pillar syntheses under the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition.

69.    The Independent Evaluation Office will continue its support to strengthening national evaluation systems and is preparing for the next National Evaluation Capacity Conference in 2024, in collaboration with the Global Evaluation Initiative.

70.    In 2024, the Independent Evaluation Office will commission an external review of the UNDP evaluation policy in line with Executive Board decision 2019/29 and the multi-year workplan of the Office. It will also undergo an audit conducted by the Independent Audit Office of UNDP.

# VIII.  The United Nations Capital Development Fund and the United Nations Volunteers programme

## A.  United Nations Capital Development Fund

71.    In 2023, the second year of its Strategic Framework, the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) invested 0.79 per cent ($690,895) of its total budget on independent evaluations, closely approaching its target of 1 per cent. Three evaluations were completed, covering the local climate adaptive living facility, municipal investment finance initiative and the Burkina Faso inclusive digital economy country strategy. Four other evaluations are in progress.

72.    UNCDF consistently prioritizes innovation and quality in its evaluation work, as reflected in its favourable ratings in the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office  evaluation quality assessment. Despite the impact of the downsizing that began in 2022, UNCDF has maintained its evaluation delivery through solid operating procedures and efficient procurement, using the evaluation unit's long-term agreement, which has helped UNCDF to maintain and improve evaluation quality. In addition, UNCDF builds on guidance and templates developed by the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office to streamline evaluation quality.

73.    Evaluations continued to report challenges with results reporting across UNCDF. In response, the evaluation unit has increased its focus on primary data collection techniques, which has resulted in longer evaluation timelines and is helping to improve results reporting and evaluation quality.

74.    Under the new Strategic Framework, UNCDF is shifting its focus towards more corporate thematic evaluations and has conducted its first country programme evaluation in Burkina Faso. To ensure accountability and transparency, all completed evaluations are accompanied by published management responses, and the evaluation unit collaborates with the communications division to publish summaries of evaluation results for wider dissemination.

75.    UNCDF actively contributes to the United Nations Evaluation Group, a key forum for evaluation professionalization and innovation across the United Nations system.

## Key evaluation findings and lessons learned

76.    Launched in 2011, the Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility aimed to strengthen climate-resilient communities and local economies. It established a standardized, internationally recognized mechanism to channel climate finance to local government authorities in developing countries, focusing on least developed countries. The project's overarching goal is to enhance climate change adaptation investments at the local level in targeted nations, aligning with the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals, notably Goal 1 (poverty eradication) and Goal 13 (climate action).

77.    The evaluation found that its 'innovation-learning-scale up' strategy has had a significant impact at the community level, although long-term resilience needs further clarification. The facility, funded at the global level mainly by the European Union and the Swedish International

Development Cooperation Agency, promotes climate-resilient communities through a country-based mechanism that channels climate finance to local governments in developing countries. With coverage in over 30 countries, the initiative provides a well-engineered mechanism for devolved planning and financing for adaptive climate investments and a global platform for locally led adaptation and access to climate adaptive finance. The evaluation noted that as the project moves forward, it needs to consider trade-offs between different approaches while consolidating achievements and expanding operations.

78.     The evaluation of the UNCDF Burkina Faso inclusive digital economy strategy found that the adoption of a country strategy, with different projects contributing to a common development challenge, has been highly relevant, especially in rural areas. The strategy, launched in 2019, aims to promote financial inclusion through digital services and is being piloted in Burkina Faso under two projects that focus on improving living conditions and increasing renewable energy access. The evaluation also noted the approach faces challenges, including the attribution of results to specific interventions. Furthermore, while the guarantees provided made it possible to unlock financing, the challenge ahead is to generalize this approach through structured financial solutions. At the strategic level, the evaluation observed a shift in the approach to digitalization by various stakeholders, increasingly considering digitalization as a means for achieving other strategic objectives. Accordingly, the evaluation recommended that the inclusive digital economy strategy should, therefore, adapt to the new context by proposing increasingly transversal and multisectoral instruments.

## B.  United Nations Volunteers programme

79.     The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme budget for evaluation in 2023 was $83,421, drawn from regular and other resources.  It covered capacity-building and the costs of the evaluation team at UNV headquarters.

80.     From 2018 onwards, UNV discontinued implementing stand-alone projects and programmes, and started concentrating solely on its role as a United Nations system-wide service by deploying UN Volunteers and providing advisory services on volunteers to United Nations entities and Member States. This limited the scope of activities that can be evaluated, focusing mainly on UN Volunteer categories, the UNV contribution to gender equality and the UNV Strategic Framework, 2022-2025.

81.     The lean evaluation function at UNV relied on strong partnerships. The UNV partnership with the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office was critical in ensuring the quality of evaluations commissioned by the organization. In 2023, the UNV evaluation team participated in various virtual learning opportunities and actively contributed to working groups of the United Nations Evaluation Group. UNV, in partnership with the United Nations Evaluation Group's Young Emerging Evaluators, developed a second-generation proposal, after an initial pilot in 2018-2020, for a coalition that integrates UN Youth Volunteers and UN Specialist Volunteers in the evaluation function across the United Nations system. This aims to strengthen evaluation capacities and create a talent pipeline of young evaluation professionals.

82.     In late 2023, UNV started the planned evaluation of the UN Volunteer categories. The overarching purpose of this evaluation is to understand better the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of the UN Volunteer categories, which make up the core offer to UNV partners. The evaluation will generate practical recommendations and provide forward-looking perspectives on how to adapt to emerging needs of both our partners and volunteers, and ultimately help UNV achieve the targets outlined in the Strategic Framework 2022-2025 and beyond. Early in the process, UNV recognized the importance of a participatory evaluation process starting with a round of internal discussions to take stock of lessons learned, followed by surveys of United Nations partners, UN Volunteers and candidates. This required an extension of the timeline of the evaluation but facilitated stakeholder buy-in. The evaluation is scheduled to be completed in the first quarter of 2024.

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