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**UNFPA – Evaluation****United Nations Population Fund****Independent evaluation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2022-2025***Summary*

The Independent Evaluation Office conducted this formative evaluation as part of the UNFPA quadrennial budgeted evaluation plan, 2022-2025. Covering the period from January 2022 to July 2024, the evaluation assessed the UNFPA organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate the progress towards the achievement of the three transformative results and catalyse a discussion on the design of the next strategic plan.

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*Note:* The present document was processed in its entirety by UNFPA.

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## I. Background

1. The UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025 is the second in a series of three strategic plans (from 2018 through 2029) intended to build a foundation for, then accelerate progress towards, achievement of the three transformative results of UNFPA by 2030.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, UNFPA strategic plans aim to achieve the goal of universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights and accelerate implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and, ultimately, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2. This formative evaluation is a milestone within an “evaluative evidence package” to inform the three UNFPA strategic plans mentioned above. The package is composed of several thematic and institutional centralized evaluations implemented under the last two quadrennial budgeted evaluation plans, a summative evaluation of the strategic plans (scheduled in 2028), and this formative evaluation.
3. The independent evaluation was initiated shortly after the start of the internal midterm review of the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025 and the Integrated Budget, 2022-2025, and efforts were made to create synergies and avoid duplication. The evaluation focus went beyond the examination of what changes occurred to accelerate progress towards the UNFPA goals to also examining the relevance of these changes and if they supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels.

## II. The purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation

4. The specific purpose of this evaluation is to provide evidence to support UNFPA learning related to what works (and what does not) to accelerate progress towards achievement of the transformative results and inform the design of the next strategic plan for 2026-2029.
5. The primary intended users of the evaluation are: (a) UNFPA Executive Board members and other Member States; (b) UNFPA senior management; (c) the Programme Division; (d) the Humanitarian Response Division; (e) the Division for Human Resources; (f) the Division for External Relations; (g) other UNFPA business units at headquarters; and (h) UNFPA regional and country offices. The results of the evaluation should also be of interest to a wider group of stakeholders, including UNFPA partners and other United Nations entities.
6. The objective of this evaluation was to assess UNFPA organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate the progress towards the achievement of the three transformative results and catalyse a discussion on the design of the next strategic plan, given the state of progress on the SDGs.
7. The scope of the evaluation includes the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025 and its annexes. It covers the period from the start of 2022 until the end of data collection in mid-2024. The focus is on the new elements introduced in this strategic plan, namely, the six accelerators<sup>2</sup> and the 12 strategic shifts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Outcome 1: By 2025, the reduction in the unmet need for family planning has accelerated; Outcome 2: By 2025, the reduction of preventable maternal deaths has accelerated; Outcome 3: By 2025, the reduction in gender-based violence and harmful practices has accelerated.

<sup>2</sup> (a) human rights-based and gender-transformative approaches; (b) innovation and digitalization; (c) partnerships, South-South and triangular cooperation, and financing; (d) data and evidence; (e) leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first; (f) resilience and adaptation, and complementarity among development, humanitarian and peace-responsive efforts.

<sup>3</sup> (a) aligning the organizational focus on achieving the three transformative results; (b) integrating the effects of megatrends, such as climate change, demographic shifts, inequalities and digitalization, into programming; (c) increasing the focus on ‘populations left behind,’ and emphasizing ‘reaching those furthest behind first’; (d) scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services, as part of universal health coverage plans; (e) expanding the humanitarian response capacity to better safeguard the lives of women, adolescents and youth, especially adolescent girls, while also addressing mental health and psychosocial issues; (f) mainstreaming resilience, prevention, preparedness and early action, and emphasizing the complementarity between humanitarian, development and peace-responsive interventions; (g) incorporating the multisectoral needs of women, adolescents and youth, and addressing structural inequalities, such as discriminatory gender and social norms, that hinder the achievement of transformative results; (h) tailoring programmatic and technical assistance to better respond to local contexts through a country office-led process, “within the United Nations family on the ground”; (i) strengthening the UNFPA normative role in all countries where UNFPA is present; (j) shifting the focus from funding the ICPD agenda to financing the ICPD agenda; (k) reinvigorating and expanding partnerships, including those with the private sector, civil society organizations, international financial institutions, academia and media, as well as partnerships through South-South and triangular cooperation; and (l) increasing the focus on joint accountability, in line with United Nations reforms, principles and practices.

Additionally, the evaluation examined four enabling elements – knowledge management; strategic communication; the business model; and human resources – to understand the extent to which they facilitated the acceleration and strategic shifts foreseen in the strategic plan. The evaluation covers the UNFPA work at global, regional and country levels, with a lens placed on its work in humanitarian contexts, given the increased emphasis on humanitarian action in recent years. A forward-looking perspective was maintained so that the evaluation findings benefit both the remainder of the current strategic plan period and the development of the subsequent plan.

### III. Evaluation methodology

8. The overall approach to the design of the evaluation stems from the set of four evaluation questions:

- (a) To what extent have the accelerators been relevant and operationalized and to what extent have they supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels?
- (b) To what extent have the strategic shifts supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels?
- (c) What are the enablers of strategic plan implementation and to what extent have they facilitated the acceleration and strategic shifts?
- (d) To what extent is the conceptualization of the next strategic plan as “unfinished business” still relevant, given the state of progress towards the SDGs and the three transformative results?

9. During the primary data collection process, the evaluation team visited six countries<sup>4</sup> and conducted six country desk reviews,<sup>5</sup> collected and analysed data from a range of primary and secondary sources, including more than 300 interviews at headquarters, regional and country levels, conducted a review of 100 key documents and an analysis of 75 country programme documents (CPDs). Information was triangulated across multiple sources to ensure that it was consistent and accurate. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluations and Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation.

10. The evaluation incorporated innovative elements, including: (a) coordinating with the six regional programme evaluations being conducted at the same time, to avoid duplication, create synergies and increase efficiency; and (b) using opportunities to leverage artificial intelligence (AI) in the data collection phase.

### IV. Conclusions and recommendations

#### A. Sequencing of UNFPA strategic plans

***Conclusion 1. Successive strategic plans aiming for the three transformative results provided continuity and focus but require adaptability, with acceleration remaining relevant yet potentially insufficient for countries facing setbacks.***

11. Despite some long-term improvements, recent data reveal uneven progress towards the SDGs, the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, and the achievement of the three transformative results, and, in some cases, reversals. Increasing pushback on the ICPD agenda has had consequences for progress towards the achievement of the three transformative results and associated goals. In many countries, targets are progressing too slowly, and considerable acceleration is still needed to achieve the three transformative results. In other contexts, where there is no progress but reversal, the concept of acceleration may not be appropriate, and efforts need to be made to prevent back-sliding. Strengthening the capacity of countries to protect the ICPD agenda is crucial.

<sup>4</sup> Bolivia, Botswana, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria and Türkiye.

<sup>5</sup> Chad, Djibouti, El Salvador, Kyrgyzstan, South Sudan and Thailand.

12. The idea of a series of three consecutive strategic plans was a good one, but changes in recent years and the new contexts within which UNFPA works, mean that the next strategic plan should not be viewed as simply addressing unfinished business. There is a clear need for continued flexibility in the third and final plan in the series of strategic plans as well as continued responsiveness to changing contexts while maintaining consistency in overall direction.

13. It will be important to provide a clearer strategic direction towards outcomes and the three transformative results, as acceleration is critical for achieving the UNFPA goals. Although the focus on acceleration, by applying the six accelerators and their related programming strategies to strengthen ICPD outputs, is relevant and has been largely operationalized, it is limited in scope and does not capture all the elements needed to accelerate progress towards the three transformative results, the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs. Nor will this focus be able to prevent the reversal of progress when and where this occurs.

14. The strategic shifts and other strategic elements that support acceleration are spread throughout the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025, without a clear effort to link them. There is no overall acceleration agenda that explicitly brings together the various elements, such as advocacy, strategic communication, knowledge brokering, financing and partnerships, in a strategic manner.

***Recommendation 1. Within the overarching framework of contributing to the progress towards the three transformative results, the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs, focus the next strategic plan on further acceleration and ensure that efforts to protect the ICPD agenda are fully integrated into the approach.***

15. Proposed actions to be taken:

- (a) To address the critical need to make faster progress towards the three transformative results, the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs, change the overall characterization of the third in the series of strategic plans from “unfinished business” to “continued acceleration”;
- (b) To ensure a coherent, strategic and integrated approach to acceleration, the next strategic plan should include a specific section describing the approaches to acceleration that bring together the different areas of work, such as normative work, funding to financing, strategic communications and knowledge management;
- (c) To protect the acceleration agenda against the evolving external environment, specific actions focussed on the gender-transformative and human rights-based approaches as well social norms should be included;
- (d) To ensure the integrated acceleration approach is relevant in humanitarian contexts, define a range of actions that will enable countries in various stages of humanitarian crisis to return to a path of acceleration;
- (e) To ensure a more strategic and flexible approach to acceleration at the country level, ensure that country offices have the space to define an integrated, country-specific and evidence-based acceleration approach in their country programme documents.

## **B. Focus of the strategic plan**

***Conclusion 2. The three transformative results effectively focused UNFPA resources on key priorities, but they do not fully encompass all stakeholder needs or the organization’s broader contributions to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs.***

16. The UNFPA focus on the three transformative results as corporate outcomes has brought clarity to the organization’s priorities. However, this focus makes it challenging to capture the direct contributions of core parts of UNFPA work to the broader ICPD agenda and the SDGs, particularly in population dynamics, gender equality, HIV, and youth.

17. While the three transformative results remain relevant across the organization, some regions have identified additional priorities, such as ending HIV transmission in East and Southern Africa, to better reflect regional priorities. In addition, UNFPA work on population and development and demography is valued by the wider United Nations system in the delivery of the SDGs, beyond those to which UNFPA directly contributes. Other areas that contribute directly to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs include UNFPA work in gender equality, HIV, youth and adolescence, and

aging. While all these areas contribute to the three transformative results, their contribution directly to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs may be greater, and is not being appropriately reported on.

18. The overall theory of change for the strategic plan does not capture these direct contributions as it shows that all contributions to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs go through the three transformative results. This points to a structural issue in the theory of change of the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025, as some outputs – such as the work on gender and social norms; population change and data; and adolescents and youth – have a direct influence on the ICPD agenda and the SDGs beyond the three transformative results.

19. At the same time, the importance of the three transformative results – in terms of the distance from achieving them or in the strategies required to achieve them – varies significantly across regions. Equally, demand from national governments also varies significantly. While there are examples of regions adapting corporate strategies and messaging to meet regional needs, such as the addition of a fourth transformative result on ending HIV transmission in the East and Southern African region, some regions still face challenges in this respect.

***Recommendation 2. The next strategic plan should clarify the UNFPA strategic positioning in population dynamics and other key areas of work (such as HIV, gender equality, youth and adolescence, and aging) and the direct contribution of these areas to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs.***

20. Proposed actions to be taken:

- (a) To ensure that the contribution of all elements of UNFPA work are understood and captured, revise the theory of change for the strategic plan to include direct contributions by UNFPA to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs that do not go exclusively through the three transformative results, notably, population dynamics, HIV, gender equality, adolescence and youth, and ageing;
- (b) To capture the contributions of the specific work on population dynamics and other areas defined above, embed them directly in the framing and narrative of the strategic plan, identify the pathways that contribute directly to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs and establish outcome-level indicators and targets to measure and assess progress;
- (c) To allow greater alignment of work to regional contexts and demands, clarify the degree to which regional offices can adapt the corporate strategy to better meet the needs of the region while remaining within the overall corporate approach and narrative;
- (d) To strengthen efforts on population dynamics and other key areas of work, develop an external relations strategy that includes branding, communications and resource mobilization for these areas.

## C. Organizational readiness

***Conclusion 3. The shifts in the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025 demanded substantial organizational effort, with clearer guidance, and needed to consider internal capacity constraints, especially in smaller country offices.***

21. The scope of a strategic plan inevitably results in a degree of complexity; and there is a need for its many parts to be clear, consistent and coherent. This was largely achieved, though not completely, with a number of areas – such as overlaps in the accelerator topics and the strategic shifts, as well as in how the concept of accelerators was presented and how they should be integrated into programming – not meeting the required levels of coherence or clarity. Within the overall strategic framework, the process of operationalizing the plan faced similar challenges. While the huge organizational effort that went into the development of the strategic plan should be acknowledged, efforts to implement the plan inevitably take time, and need to be planned well in advance.

22. Delays in operationalization, specifically in the development of effective guidance for country offices (including clarification of some of the concepts introduced in the strategic plan), led to slow implementation in some key areas, including in integrating the effects of megatrends, as new areas of work for UNFPA. Moreover, the modes of engagement in the UNFPA business model have not evolved and are not fully aligned with the strategic shifts set out in the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025.

23. The business model, particularly its modes of engagement, has not always been adjusted to align with the strategic shifts. While the strategic plan focuses on acceleration, the modes of engagement have remained largely unchanged. Interventions based on piloting, demonstration or proof of concept have the potential to bring together multiple accelerators or strategic shifts, but the current business model would need to be adapted to accommodate this approach.

**Recommendation 3. Operationalize acceleration by clarifying and strengthening linkages between concepts and programming approaches well in advance of the launch of the new strategic plan.**

24. Proposed actions to be taken:

(a) To facilitate stronger and more coherent implementation of the strategic plan, clearly define and streamline programming approaches, accelerators and strategic shifts, and identify the linkages and differences between them;

(b) To strengthen existing documents to operationalize the strategic plan, enhance coherence between strategies and programme guidance, and ensure similar coherence for any new strategies;

(c) To ensure timely and contextualized support and guidance for strategic plan implementation, build on the current midterm review “prioritization exercise,” and review the additional support and guidance that will be required in advance of the approval of the strategic plan;

(d) To ensure increased focus on acceleration at the country level, revise the modes of engagement to align with a new integrated approach to accelerate progress towards the three transformative results, the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs.

## **D. Organizational coherence**

**Conclusion 4. A clearer approach to acceleration in the next strategic plan, and the country programmes, is needed to enhance coherence across UNFPA initiatives, align modes of engagement and guide human resource priorities at the country level.**

25. All the strategic shifts are relevant, with some having the potential to greatly accelerate progress on the three transformative results. While the shifts related to leveraging and influencing normative work and ICPD financing are not new concepts, they constitute a change in emphasis and direction. As a result, new or improved strategies, guidance and efforts aimed at changing mindsets and building individual capacity were required, but some were missing or developed only recently.

26. Time and effort are needed to fully operationalize and align the organization to a new strategic plan, especially given the key role of country programmes in the realignment process. While country offices have largely integrated the accelerator approach through the development of new country programme documents, full implementation across the organization may take some time. Similarly, the realignment process involves not only updating the country programme results frameworks but also changing intervention strategies, operationalizing accelerators and aligning human resources.

27. Small country offices, which represent 39 per cent of UNFPA country presence, face specific challenges in implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts, including constraints on structures, human resources and budgets. These offices often have scaled-down versions of larger office structures, with staff “double-hatting” responsibilities and taking on multiple focal point roles. The focus is often still on project delivery, with less emphasis on the upstream work required by the strategic shifts. These offices often require greater support from regional offices. Some innovative solutions are being employed to address these challenges, such as the establishment of a middle-income country hub in East and Southern Africa and the development of strategic partnerships with academic institutions and think tanks.

28. The organization’s move towards more upstream work as an advocate, convenor and broker presents additional challenges in demonstrating the contribution of UNFPA to development change. Attribution of change – such as stronger policies or increased financing for sexual and reproductive health – is difficult to quantify due to multiple influencing factors. However, qualitative analysis through country programme evaluations can help identify results and effective strategies in an upstream acceleration agenda.

**Recommendation 4. Strengthen capacities to undertake the critical measures that will support acceleration, especially in normative work, funding to finance, knowledge management and strategic communications.**

29. Proposed actions to be taken:

- (a) To strengthen implementation of an integrated approach to acceleration, develop and roll-out staff capacity-strengthening initiatives for the critical areas related to acceleration: normative work, funding to finance, knowledge management and strategic communications;
- (b) To ensure that guidance and capacity building efforts are tailored to different contexts, technical leads should work with regional offices to adapt guidance, as appropriate;
- (c) To promote the most appropriate human resource configurations, especially in small offices with limited capacity, facilitate the staffing alignment exercise to ensure the right balance of staff between those with specialization in technical areas and those with expertise in specific modes of engagement. In addition, explore the opportunity to leverage existing resources by making the best use of technical resources within regional or subregional technical hubs or other country offices;
- (d) To further strengthen UNFPA capacity with limited resources, enhance partnerships with providers of relevant knowledge and expertise, including the private sector, civil society and academia;
- (e) To ensure a more efficient and coherent approach to specific aspects of UNFPA work, strengthen staff capacity to articulate the UNFPA contribution to and engagement with United Nations system-wide efforts (such as gender norms; youth and adolescents), particularly as it relates to leveraging and advocating for change.

## **E. Integration of humanitarian, development and peace efforts**

**Conclusion 5. UNFPA has improved its humanitarian response capacity but needs clearer guidance and strategic integration to implement resilience, humanitarian, development and peace efforts within resource constraints.**

30. There is evidence of UNFPA efforts to expand its humanitarian response capacity across all regions, in line with the strategic shifts identified in the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025. Expanding humanitarian capacity is especially relevant in an organization that commits just over half of its total programme expenditure to humanitarian assistance.

31. Despite the clear evidence of increased humanitarian response capacity, there are only scattered examples of successful experiences with resilience and operating within the humanitarian-development-peace continuum. While recognizing that working within this approach is made more complicated by the protracted nature of crises, the lack of comprehensive corporate guidance on integrating the resilience and humanitarian-development-peace approach accelerator into UNFPA programming is an important gap. The absence of adequate guidance and a coherent corporate strategy has been reaffirmed by regional programme evaluations. Even though efforts to make progress with the humanitarian-development-peace approach have been made, as triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the issuance of a corporate strategy is still pending. Any strategy should acknowledge that many agencies are working on this issue and that it requires joined-up work within the United Nations system.

32. There are potential challenges in balancing humanitarian response skills with those needed for influencing and advocacy, particularly in the context of limited funding and staff capacity. Staff accustomed to working in development settings may not have the skills, experience or mindsets to work in humanitarian settings, with staff whose focus was normative work being particularly challenged by the need to switch to a more immediate response. Other United Nations agencies with both development and humanitarian programming are also considering the potential implications of this difference in skill sets.

**Recommendation 5. Promote better integration of humanitarian, development and peace-responsive interventions while taking into account the different and changing contexts within which UNFPA works.**

33. Proposed actions to be taken:

- (a) To support better integration of humanitarian, development and peace-responsive programming at the country level, develop a clear conceptual and operational framework in this area and ensure flexibility, to allow for context-specific approaches in the different settings;
  - (b) To increase the support for and visibility of UNFPA work in humanitarian contexts, clearly articulate the UNFPA humanitarian programmatic offer, which should continue to be done within a broader United Nations system response;
  - (c) To ensure coherence across the organization, adapt programming and financial processes and procedures to support the continuity of development and humanitarian efforts;
  - (d) To reduce the risk of reversing progress towards UNFPA goals, increase efforts aimed at identifying what works in mainstreaming resilience, prevention and early action;
  - (e) To ensure a strong UNFPA response to crises – and in keeping with the recommendations of the evaluation of UNFPA capacity in humanitarian action <sup>6</sup> and the evaluation of the organizational resilience of UNFPA <sup>7</sup> – strengthen the skills and competencies for all UNFPA staff to flexibly engage with varying types and phases of crises.
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<sup>6</sup> [Evaluation of the UNFPA capacity in humanitarian action \(2012-2019\).](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Formative evaluation of the organizational resilience of UNFPA in light of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)