

# Formative Evaluation of the UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Programme 2022-2025

Final Report

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

CO	Country Office
ESA	East and Southern Africa
ESARO	UNFPA Regional Office for East and Southern Africa
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GBV	Gender-based violence
GIS	Geographic Information System
GRFP	Gender-responsive family policies
GTA	Gender transformative approaches
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HQ	Headquarters
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
KII	Key informant interview
MMR	Maternal Mortality Rate
MTR	Mid-term review
RECs	Regional Economic Commissions
RO	Regional Office
RP	Regional Programme 2022-2025
RPE	Regional programme evaluation
RR	Reproductive rights
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SP	Strategic Plan
SPE	Strategic Plan evaluation
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights

SSTC	South-South and triangular cooperation
STI	Sexually transmitted infection
TR	Transformative Result
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
ToR	Terms of reference
UNDCO	United Nations Development Coordination Office
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

# Executive Summary

## Purpose, Objectives and Scope

This formative evaluation of the UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Programme 2022-2025 (ESARO RP), commissioned by the East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO), is part of a coordinated set of formative evaluations designed to assess UNFPA's organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the 3 Transformational Results (3TRs). The evaluation aims to provide feedback for the remainder of the current Regional Programme, inform the design of the 2026-2029 Regional Programme, and contribute to the Strategic Plan evaluation (SPE). It may also support ESARO's learning and accountability.

The evaluation focuses on assessing the integration and operationalization of the UNFPA Strategic Plan's six accelerators and twelve strategic shifts, as well as enabling factors, in the the ESA Regional Programme. The primary users of this evaluation are the ESA regional office management and staff, to whom the recommendations are addressed. ESARO partners, UNFPA HQ (including the Independent Evaluation Office) and UNFPA country offices in the region are the secondary audience. The evaluation scope included all regional programme outputs from the start of 2022 until the end of data collection in July 2024 across all 23 countries in the ESA region, with particular attention to the key challenges and priority areas for the ESA region.

## Methodology and Process

The methodological approach sought to ensure that the unique context of the ESA region was meaningfully prioritized with recommendations that are resonant and actionable by ESARO management and staff, while aligning with and supporting the SPE process. The evaluation was utilization focused, with a critical focus on ownership of the process of the evaluation as well as its results, and its usefulness for the organization and future decision-making of the leadership. The evaluation methodology was adaptive and participatory, to account for the complexity of the issues in the region, support iterative design and, where appropriate, use a theory-based assessment of change processes. The Evaluation Team employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection. The Team interviewed 234 key informants from across UNFPA, other UN agencies, donors and partners. The Team reviewed over 400 documents. The Team conducted missions in four countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia and Zimbabwe) and participated in the SPE mission to Botswana. The evaluation report is complemented by four deep dives and lessons learned from the country missions.

## Background

The East and Southern Africa (ESA) region is complex, with a broad array of demographic, geographic, economic, cultural and political contexts. Although the last ten years have seen progress, the region continues to face challenges related to maternal mortality, unmet need for



family planning, and gender-based violence. Some countries in the region have high rates of harmful practices including female genital mutilation. The region is the global epicentre of HIV.

The UNFPA ESARO Regional Programme Action Plan 2022-2025 (RPAP) provides support to the governments of 23 countries and regional institutions in East and Southern Africa. Within the context of ‘building forward better’ from the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerating progress towards the transformative results, the RPAP aims to accelerate the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, with a focus on young people. It directly contributes to SDGs 1, 3, 5, 10, 13, 16, 17 and the three UNFPA Strategic Plan outcomes: (a) by 2025, the reduction in the unmet need for family planning has accelerated; (b) by 2025, the reduction in preventable maternal deaths has accelerated; and (c) by 2025, the reduction in gender-based violence and harmful practices has accelerated; as well as a fourth region-specific result on ending sexual transmission of HIV.

## Summary of Findings

***To what extent are current accelerators effective, coherent and adaptable to evolving challenges to advance UNFPA’s results?*** The ESA Regional Office’s focus on key accelerators has generated meaningful results. The RPAP incorporated all six accelerators from the Strategic Plan: innovation including digitalization; partnerships including South-South and triangular cooperation and financing; human rights based and gender transformative approaches; leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first; resilience, nexus and adaptation; data, demographic dynamics and intelligence. The RPAP output activities have integrated the accelerators and adapted to the context over the period of the Programme, both geographically and in response to disruptions, including COVID-19 and climate or conflict-related crises. While these efforts are reaching the top layer, there are still key populations for whom the risks related to SRHR, HIV and GBV remain high. This reality is despite RO programming and normative work that has made significant advances in legislative, policy and service provision. Some of this gap can be attributed to the need for greater integration of accelerators such as data, innovation and partnerships across the strategic and operational structure of the organization. Gaps related to young people and HIV infection in key populations require a greater focus on addressing social norms and the broader application of human rights based and gender transformative approaches.

***How are the strategic shifts supporting the achievements of the TRs in the ESA region?*** The Regional Office has augmented the value of the organizational focus on achieving the three transformative results with strategy and programming that is responsive to the complex realities in the region, including adding ending sexual transmission of HIV as a region-specific result. The Regional Office has recognized and advanced the strategic shifts through collaboration (UN partner relationships and strong flagship programmes) and learning (research and direction on megatrends and the development of a funding-financing strategy for the region). Especially noteworthy is the Regional Office’s identification of key existential threats to the region, such as climate change and social norm change. The UNFPA’s ability to achieve its goals requires ongoing attention to funding decline and the need for synergy and collaboration between UN agencies with complementary mandates. The Regional Office has positioned itself to strategically advance on these issues,

including supporting Country Offices with evidence, technical support and guidance. However, it is unclear that this positioning is moving at the same rapid pace as the issues themselves – in other words, it is unclear that the identification and strategic thought leadership has translated to agile operational response at pace.

***To what extent have the enablers facilitated the implementation of the accelerators and strategic shifts within the region?*** The SPE Inception Report identified a number of enablers (cross-cutting coordination, strategic communication, resource mobilization, knowledge management, business operations and M&E) to operationalize the strategic shifts and accelerators. These enablers are not new to the Regional Office and have been in place for a period prior to the RPAP. The Regional Office has adopted an adaptive management approach that has prioritized agility and learning in the workforce and processes. There is a valuable appreciation of the complexity of the region and the value of strategic foresight and futures approaches. It has prioritized critical futures-based and intersectional approaches and skillsets. However, there are elements of the workforce structure and operational processes that have not yet fully enabled realization of the desired approach and outcomes. There is a need to ensure that personnel are trained on critical strategic and cross-cutting skillsets including those on resource mobilization, resilience and preparedness, and innovation.

## Conclusions

Overall, the Evaluation Team concludes that the Regional Office developed and implemented a Regional Programme that was strategically designed to advance progress towards the TRs, to respond to the complex contexts in the region and to provide evidence, thought leadership, advocacy and technical support to Country Offices, UN colleagues, and partners and stakeholders. This work has created a foundation for progress that aligns to key adaptive management drivers (agility, learning, collaboration, and leadership). However, there is still work to be done to ensure internal capacity and external partnerships are fully able to implement the strategic approaches.

### **CONCLUSION 1: ESARO'S SUPPORT TO COUNTRY OFFICES ALIGNS TO ITS SHIFT TOWARDS AN ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH AND RECOGNITION OF INCREASING COMPLEXITY IN THE REGION.**

The Regional Office's provision of technical assistance to Country Offices was tailored to country contexts and holistic across thematic and operational areas and work product types, and directly contributed to the achievement of the RPAP outputs and outcomes at country levels. Throughout the period of the RPAP, the RO adopted an adaptive management approach that targeted futures thinking, assessment tools, and evidence generation, which broadened the impact of the RPAP work from immediate to longer-term, preparing the region and Country Offices for ongoing fluidity and complex challenges. Highlights include humanitarian and preparedness responses, commodities/supply chain management, integration of HIV in SRHR. It was evident that in both thematic and operational ways, these approaches are still fresh and Country Offices are not yet sufficiently supported or capacitated to completely realize their potential.

**CONCLUSION 2: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT WAS STRATEGICALLY STRENGTHENED DURING THE PERIOD OF THE RPAP AND STAKEHOLDERS WERE ENGAGED IN THE REGIONAL OFFICE’S APPROACH.** It was evident that the Regional Office is a valued partner for key stakeholders and it approached these relationships in a strategic manner during the period of the RPAP, including through the development of a partnership strategy and in thematic interventions. Highlights of partner engagement include strengthened relationships with regional economic communities and the African Union, and cross-cutting engagement with young people in advocacy, innovation and ideation. The Regional Office has recognized that partner diversification is critical for acceleration and identified areas for improvement. Improving diversification will be dependent on ensuring that ESARO itself is sufficiently capacitated and its offering can be nuanced to meet the interests of new partners.

**CONCLUSION 3: ESARO’S STRUCTURAL CAPACITY IS TAXED BY THE DEMANDS OF THE RPAP.** There is no doubt about the expertise and capacity of ESARO’s personnel, which is evident in the successful move to a more futures-focused and adaptive construct. However, there are staffing gaps and opportunities to restructure, given the complexity and needs of the region. The institutional arrangements struggle with bureaucratic systems that are barriers to agile responses and, in some cases, operational credibility and programmatic success. While the RPAP outputs have been achieved or are on track, these challenges may hinder acceleration. Decreased resource mobilization is an existential threat to the RO.

**CONCLUSION 4: ESARO’S CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBAL AND REGIONAL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IS IMPACTFUL.** ESARO has generated an impactful body of strategy, evidence and thought leadership across all TRs, as well as in the critical field of population and development. It has developed critical knowledge pieces on the megatrends impacting the region. This work has allowed the RO to be persuasive about its mandate. The RO has demonstrated specific leadership in ending sexual transmission of HIV, regional normative frameworks on ending GBV and harmful practices and in data analysis. This thematic leadership is augmented by operational strategies such as resource mobilization and partnership and cross-cutting strategies such as Leave No One Behind.

**CONCLUSION 5: ESARO HAS BEEN AN ACTIVE CONTRIBUTOR AND LEADER IN THE UN SYSTEM AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL, TO POSITIVE EFFECT. MAINTAINING THIS POSITION REQUIRES ONGOING ATTENTION.** ESARO has demonstrated leadership in the regional UN system, through its roles in key technical tables and working groups, as well as through its leadership of significant joint programmes such as 2gether4SRHR, Spotlight and Safeguard Young People. During the RPAP period, it expanded this position, engaging more actively with other UN agencies, such as IOM on migration and UNHCR, WHO and others related to humanitarian. In this way, ESARO has introduced its mandate into the most critical contexts facing the region. However, the operationalization of the UNFPA’s complementary mandate with other UN agencies combined with increased competition for reducing donor funds means that ESARO will need to continue to assert its relevance and rationale for leadership at the UN regional table.

**CONCLUSION 6: ESARO’S MOVE TO ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP HAS CREATED THE FOUNDATION FOR THE NEXT RPAP, WHICH SHOULD SEEK TO ENTRENCH THE STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO THE COMPLEXITY OF THE REGION. THIS REQUIRES REINFORCING THROUGH THE NEXT STRATEGIC PLAN.** Over the course of the RPAP, ESARO has shifted to adaptive leadership, putting in place a series of building blocks that have generated new evidence, strategies, tools and relationships that recognize and respond to the variety of complex and fluid contexts in the region. The strategic foresight approach already in place is identifying upcoming trends. The RO has begun to learn the lessons of needing the institutional capacity at the regional and country levels to catch up to new approaches, and of integrating cross-cutting capacities in areas like preparedness planning and innovation. It will be critical to solidify institutional capacities and continue to diversify resource mobilization options and strategic partnerships in order to capitalize on the momentum generated in this period. Thematically, increased focus on data and evidence, social norms and targeted responses is required to accelerate progress for those who remain left behind. The Strategic Plan approach was not fully responsive to the needs of the region, particularly with respect to the positioning on data and evidence and HIV.

## Recommendations

The recommendations are intended to provide direction for the remainder of the current Regional Programme and are targeted at the conceptualization and implementation of the next Regional Programme and the next UNFPA Strategic Plan (both 2026-2029). All of the recommendations are based on the overall conclusion that the Regional Office, through the RPAP, has built a foundation of strategic approach, evidence, thought leadership and tools that require entrenching and advancing in order to fully realize acceleration and scale.

1. ESARO should engage with UNFPA HQ in the reformulation of the next Strategic Plan to reinforce the position of the organization’s data mandate and ensure positioning of key regional issues.
2. Building on the action items in recommendation 1, the next RPAP should even more directly embrace complexity and fluidity in the region, with a focus on building agile programming, targeted interventions and strengthening behavioural change.
3. ESARO should amplify the use of regional structures, partners and flagship joint programmes as a means of resource mobilization, advocacy and achieving scale.
4. ESARO should match RPAP outputs and regional needs with operational and workforce capacity.
5. ESARO should support Country Offices to elevate capacity to absorb and implement on key regional priorities in the RPAP.
6. ESARO should continue to identify and develop strategies and adaptive planning to accelerate the response to emerging issues.
7. ESARO should articulate and promote its comparative advantage.

# 1. Evaluation Approach

## 1.1 Introduction

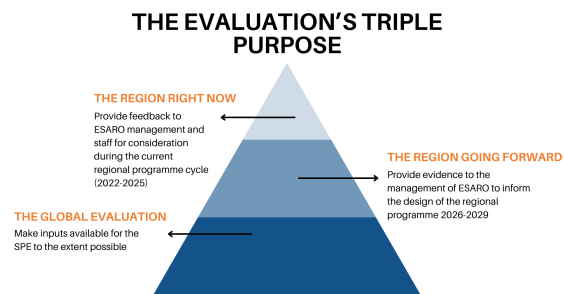
This formative evaluation of the East and Southern Africa Regional Programme (ESARO RP)<sup>1</sup>, commissioned by the East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO), is part of a coordinated set of formative evaluations designed to assess UNFPA’s organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the 3 Transformational Results (3TRs). These evaluations include a global formative evaluation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan (SP) 2022-2025<sup>2</sup> commissioned by the UNFPA Evaluation Office in coordination with regional programme evaluations being conducted by the six Regional Offices, which are collectively designed (in terms of timing and methodological approach) to catalyze and inform strategic discussions on the design of the next Strategic Plan and Regional Programmes.

In the Region, this evaluation is a part of the evaluative evidence available to the ESARO to support Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) design and future programming, along with a number of institutional, thematic and Country Programme evaluations commissioned by the Region under its Evaluation Plan. Of note, this evaluation was conducted from March-July 2024, shortly after the delivery of both the 2022-2025 Global and Regional Programmes East and Southern Africa Regional Programme Action Plan Midterm Review Reports (MTRs), which provide significant and recent evidence for the findings contained herein.

## 1.2 Evaluation Purpose, Objectives and Scope

The triple purpose of this formative evaluation, set out in Figure 1, is to provide evidence to support UNFPA’s accountability and 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 Regional Programme, its stated intent to focus on ‘unfinished business’, and subsequently the next Strategic Plan. The Terms of Reference for the Evaluation (ToR) are appended at Annex A.

Figure 1: The Evaluation Triple Purpose, prepared by the Evaluation Team



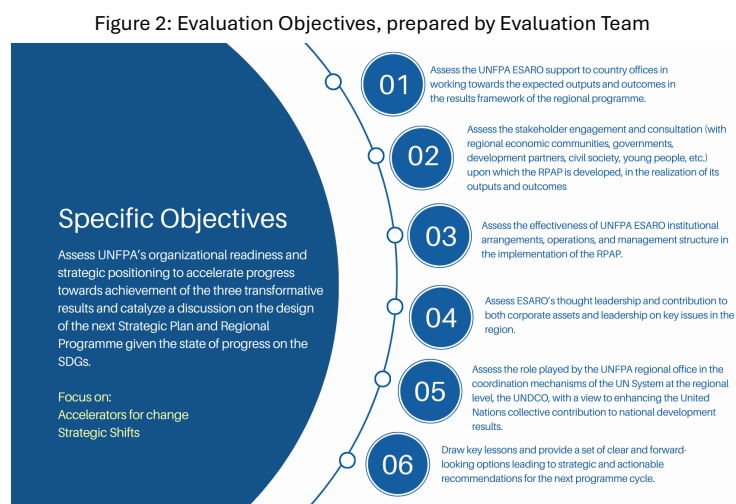
Source: RPE ToR, attached at Annex A

<sup>1</sup> Final ESARO RPAP 2022-2025, 14.06.2021

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unfpa.org/strategic-plan-2022>

The objective of the evaluation, as set out

Figure 2, was to assess UNFPA's organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate the progress towards the achievement of the three transformative results and catalyze a discussion on the design of the next Strategic Plan and Regional Programme given the state of progress on the SDGs. New elements introduced in this Strategic Plan were the focus – namely the six accelerators for change – and the strategic shifts that were proposed, including flexibility and agility programming, financing, innovation and partnerships.



Source: RPE ToR, attached at Annex A

including flexibility and agility programming, financing, innovation and partnerships.

The specific objectives of this evaluation were:

- Assess the UNFPA ESARO support to country offices in working towards the expected outputs and outcomes in the results framework of the regional programme.
- Assess the stakeholder engagement and consultation (with regional economic communities, governments, development partners, civil society, young people, etc.) upon which the RPAP is developed, in the realization of its outputs and outcomes.
- Assess the effectiveness of UNFPA ESARO institutional arrangements, operations, and management structure in the implementation of the RPAP.
- Assess ESARO's thought leadership and contribution to both corporate assets and leadership on key issues in the region.
- Assess the role played by the UNFPA regional office in the coordination mechanisms of the UN System at the regional level, with a view to enhancing the United Nations collective contribution to national development results.
- Draw key lessons and provide a set of clear and forward-looking options leading to strategic and actionable recommendations for the next programme cycle.

The primary users of this evaluation are the ESA regional office management and staff, to whom the recommendations are addressed. ESARO partners, UNFPA HQ (including the Independent Evaluation Office) and UNFPA country offices in the region are the secondary audience.

The evaluation scope included all regional programme outputs from the start of 2022 until the end of data collection in July 2024 across all 23 countries in the ESA region, with particular attention to the key challenges and priority areas for the ESA region, including ensuring country-differentiated approaches to:

- Enhanced SRHR policy, financing and accountability
- Provision of people centred, quality SRHR-care and services
- Addressing harmful gender, socio-cultural norms and discriminatory practices affecting SRHR

- Enhanced use of population change and data for decision making on SRHR in the context of ICPD and SDGs
- Improved empowerment, participation and accountability of adolescents and youth for realization of universal SRHR and human capital
- Strengthened SRHR and systems resilience in humanitarian response and peace-building

The evaluation scope includes the ‘accelerators’ and ‘strategic shifts’ included in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 as applied in the Regional Programme Action Plan from the start of 2022 until the end of data collection in July 2024. The Strategic Plan Evaluation (SPE) identified ‘enablers’ that should facilitate the operationalization of the accelerators and strategic shifts, including strategic communications, human resources strategies and management, knowledge management and the UNFPA business model. These enablers are also included in the scope of the RPE.

### 1.3 Methodological Approach

The overall methodological approach was designed to conform to expectations set out in the Terms of Reference (ToR): to ensure that the unique context of the ESA region was meaningfully prioritized with recommendations that are resonant and actionable by ESARO management and staff, while aligning with and supporting the SPE process. The evaluation was utilization focused, with a critical focus on ownership of the process of the evaluation as well as its results, and its usefulness for the organization and future decision-making of the leadership. The evaluation followed the principles of gender-responsive evaluations by incorporating a systemic approach to the analysis.

As noted above, the evaluation was formative in nature – rather than a summative assessment of past performance, the evaluation was intended to provide insight and recommendations for future planning. In accordance with the ToR, the evaluation methodology was adaptive and participatory, to account for the complexity of the issues in the region, support iterative design and, where appropriate, use a theory-based assessment of change processes.<sup>3</sup>

As a part of the iterative design process, the Evaluation Team reviewed the RPAP Theory of Change, contained in the Change Story attached at Annex B. No changes or reconstructions were made to the Change Story during the Inception Process as the MTR completed in December 2023 had undergone an extensive process of testing the Theory of Change and deemed it appropriate. However, it became clear during the data collection process that, while the Theory of Change remained useful, the Regional Office’s extensive work with futures thinking and strategic foresight had advanced an approach that is more complex than the Theory of Change itself and so the evaluation process includes consideration of both the Theory of Change and its evolution.

The participatory approach allowed the Evaluation Team to both test systems against experience and to iterate the design of the evaluation to ensure the complexity and fluidity of the region and the RPAP response was understood. Key internal staff at the regional and country level were engaged both in data collection and in workshop discussions. A broad array of stakeholders and

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<sup>3</sup> UNFPA IEO Guidance on Adaptive Evaluation [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/admin-resource/IEO\\_Guidance\\_on\\_Adaptive\\_Evaluation.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/admin-resource/IEO_Guidance_on_Adaptive_Evaluation.pdf)

beneficiaries across the region and in each targeted country were interviewed and where appropriate also engaged in discussions on emerging themes. Attention was paid ensuring the participation of women, youth, people from targeted groups and demographic/geographic areas who may be experiencing multiple or intersecting vulnerabilities. At the completion of each of four country visits, the Evaluation Team held workshops with the Country Office personnel examining emerging themes and addressing gaps in data throughout the process, with opportunities for dialogue and engagement. These themes were tested again in follow up meetings with Regional Office personnel, as applicable.

## 1.4 Evaluation Questions

Evaluation questions were developed at UNFPA HQ with the SPE team and then adapted by all six regional evaluations. For this evaluation, in addition to questions on accelerators, strategic shifts and enablers, an additional focus on humanitarian response was added, as well as reference to the region-specific result on ending sexual transmission of HIV, which was added across all evaluation questions. There are four main evaluation questions, each with subquestions. They are presented at Table 1 below in alignment with the OECD-DAC criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, and efficiency.<sup>4</sup> Gender-responsiveness and human rights are cross-cutting criteria.

Table 1: Evaluation Questions, subquestions and alignment to OECD-DAC criteria, prepared by Evaluation Team

Evaluation Questions	Relevance	Coherence	Effectiveness	Efficiency
<b>Accelerators</b>				
<b>EQ1. To what extent are current accelerators effective, coherent and adaptable to evolving challenges to advance UNFPA's results?</b> 1.1 To what extent has the RO successfully utilized each of the six accelerators, as relevant to the regional context, to accelerate progress towards the transformative results? 1.2 To what extent has the RO expanded its humanitarian response capacity in the region?	✓	✓	✓	
<b>Strategic Shifts</b>				
<b>EQ2. How are the strategic shifts supporting the achievement of the 3TRs in the East and Southern Africa region?</b> 2.1 To what extent has the RO successfully utilized and incorporated each of the 12 strategic shifts, as relevant to the regional context, to accelerate progress? 2.2 How did the RO's adoption of an Adaptive Management organizational approach support progress towards the TRs?		✓	✓	
<b>Enablers</b>				
<b>EQ3. To what extent have the enablers facilitated the implementation of the accelerators and strategic shifts within the region?</b> 3.1 How fit-for-purpose are enabling functions and business processes (cross-cutting coordination, strategic communication, resource mobilization, knowledge management, business operations, M&E)?	✓			✓

Source: Evaluation Team, SPE and iterative discussions

<sup>4</sup> <https://web-archiver.oecd.org/temp/2024-05-13/81829-daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>



Based on these questions an evaluation matrix was developed during the Inception phase. The matrix ensures that not only is the evaluation asking the right questions but that there is an understood baseline for evaluation (indicators), a means of data triangulation (verification) and an identified set of sources for the answers. The evaluation matrix is attached at Annex E.

## 1.5 Ethical Considerations

The design of the evaluation followed United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation in the United Nations system and abided by the UNEG Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct, the UNFPA Evaluation Policy 2024, and other key guiding documents. The Evaluation Team's approach included consideration of the following Ethical Guiding Principles: 1) respect for dignity and diversity; 2) right to self-determination; 3) fair representation; 4) ethical protocols for vulnerable groups; 5) redress; 6) confidentiality; and 7) avoidance of harm.

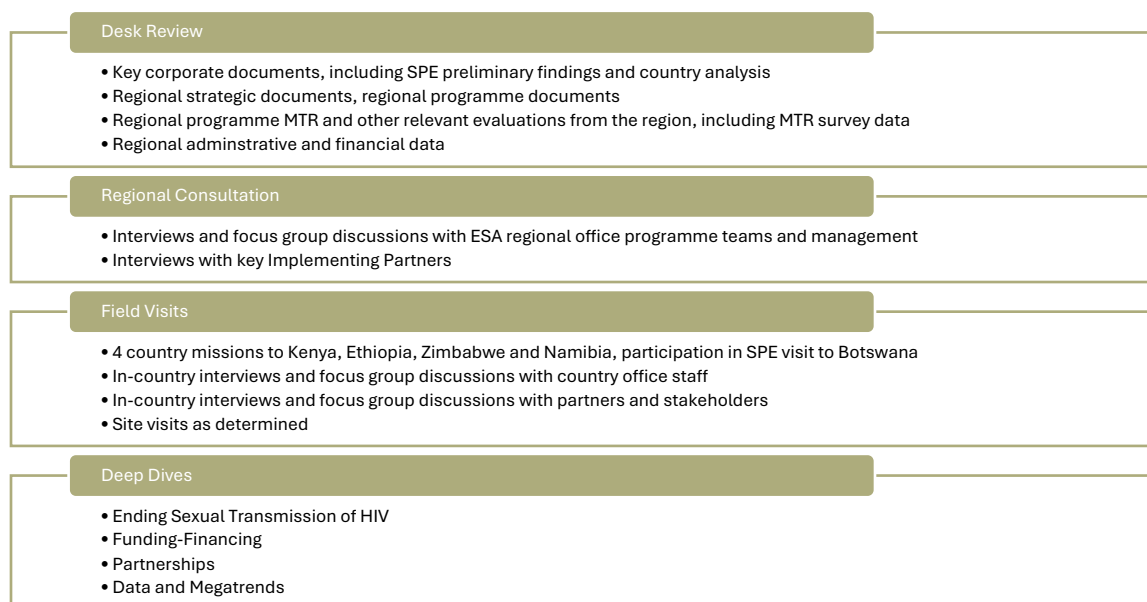
The evaluation's data collection protocol, developed in the Inception Phase and followed throughout the data collection process, included protocols for confidentiality and anonymity of informants, transparency of process, an informed consent checklist that included special provisions for vulnerable populations or especially sensitive topics, and a process for safe storage of collected data. The protocol was informed by and aligned to the UNFPA Evaluation Handbook and UNEG guidance with respect to gender-responsive and human rights approaches to data collection and quality assurance.

In accordance with the WHO Guidelines for researching gender-based violence, the Evaluation Team did not seek out interviews with survivors of violence or harmful practices, choosing instead to glean information about their experiences from those civil society organizations and service providers who support them, as well as from existing UNFPA data. However, the Evaluation Team did meet with beneficiaries in other contexts, including educators, trainers, health care providers, and shelter/crisis centre workers, and so the Evaluation Team included safety and confidentiality safeguards. These safeguards included ensuring that the Evaluation Team members have specialized understanding and experience with the protocols, and ensuring that interview questions focused on beneficiary engagement with the interventions and not on personal experience or traumas.

## 1.6 Description of Data Collection Methods

The RPE followed the model and process set out by the SPE in terms of data collection methods, albeit adapted to the regional context. The evaluation employed a mixed method approach, using a combination of qualitative strategies to achieve a comprehensive and triangulated understanding of progress. This included a variety of data collection methods described at Figure 3. Data collection tools are appended at Annex F.

Figure 3: Description of RPE Data Collection Methods, prepared by the Evaluation Team



Source: RPE ToR, attached at Annex A and RPE Inception Report

As a part of the substantive desk review, more than 400 documents were reviewed, including project and programme documents at the Regional and Country levels, as well as evaluations and other secondary sources. This element of data collection provided evidence with respect to the products produced by the Regional Office, the foundational documents that underpinned the logic for the Programme design and the resource approaches for the Programme. A list of documents is found at Annex H.

Notably, there was a volume of recent evaluative evidence of Regional Office programming available for review. The RPAP Midterm Review (MTR) was conducted in 2023. The Evaluation Team relied on the evidence collection process and findings of those assessments as a critical part of data collection – both as meaningful recent evidence and to avoid duplication in data collection.

It was determined that the Evaluation Team would visit four ESA region countries – Kenya, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Namibia – during the data collection phase. These countries were selected by the ESARO as representative of the broad spectrum of contexts present in the ESA region and their approach to key programme priorities:

- Ethiopia:* Complex humanitarian challenges, responding to climate change, conflict, political shifts, East Africa
- Kenya:* Complex programme with a focus on refugee, humanitarian, terrorism, operational volume, East Africa

*Zimbabwe:* Large programme with operational volume, multitude of programmatic and thematic areas, Southern Africa

*Namibia:* Middle income country, Southern Africa

In addition to these country visits, the Evaluation Team took part in the SPE’s visit to Botswana in March 2024.

Based on these considerations, the Evaluation Team, together with the Regional Office and Country Offices in the four countries, prepared a stakeholder map and from that developed the interview sample. Interviews provided evidence that triangulated the documentary evidence, provided valuable insights into the qualitative impact of activities and approaches and revealed gaps or concerns. Focus groups allowed participants to share information with the Evaluation Team and each other, which increased the comfort level of some participants and allowed for a comparative analysis of the experiences of participants. A list of interviewed stakeholders is at Annex D. At the end of each country visit, the Evaluation Team conducted a preliminary observations workshop with the Country Office staff. Slides from those workshops are attached at Annex G.

The final interview sample (individual interviews and focus groups) was 234 respondents (115 women, 119 men, 29 young people)<sup>5</sup>, which included 72 UNFPA Regional and Country Office personnel and 162 regional programme stakeholders, as follows at Table 2:

Table 2: Interview Sample disaggregated by gender and age, prepared by the Evaluation Team

Regional/Country	UNFPA Personnel	Regional Programme Stakeholders
Region	28 (15W, 13M)	5 (1F, 4M)
Ethiopia	9 (3F, 6M)	11 (2F, 9M, 1 youth)
Kenya	13 (8F, 5M)	64 (29F, 35M, 12 youth)
Namibia	4 (4F)	39 (15F, 24M, 9 youth)
Zimbabwe	18 (12F, 6M)	43 (26F, 17M, 7 youth)

Source: Interview Data

## 1.7 The Analytical Process

As discussed above, the analytical process was based on adaptive evaluation approaches. The evaluation team used a variety of evaluation methods for analyzing complexity, including creative tensions, causal loop diagrams, iceberg models, contribution analysis, and outcome harvesting, which can be seen in the Findings below.<sup>6</sup> The analysis was tested in iterative design sessions, internally as an evaluation team, with Country Office staff at the end of each mission, and with the evaluation manager in regular discussions. As noted above, a significant iteration in analysis was introduced to include the UNFPA’s A-Compass Adaptive Management modelling<sup>7</sup>, and in particular the key drivers of agility, learning, collaboration and leadership, (seen in Figure 4) as a model

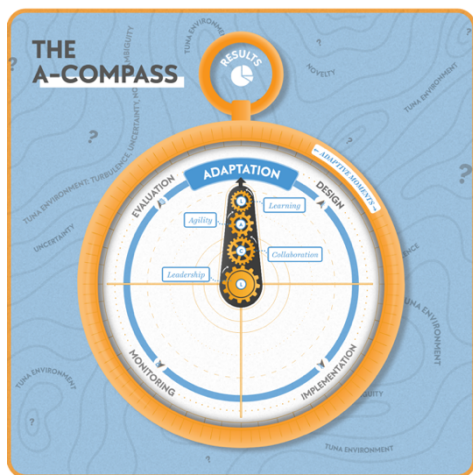
<sup>5</sup> The disaggregation of individuals by gender only accounted for identification by man and woman.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/admin-resource/IEO\\_Guidance\\_on\\_Adaptive\\_Evaluation.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/admin-resource/IEO_Guidance_on_Adaptive_Evaluation.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> The A-Compass, UNFPA Adaptive Management Model <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA%20-%20Adaptive%20Management%20Framework.pdf>

against which to understand the Region’s logic and assess success, in combination with the RPAP Theory of Change.

Figure 4: The A-Compass



Source: UNFPA Adaptive Management Model

Data received was analyzed against the Change Story and the Evaluation Questions to assess the performance of the Programme based on its stated assumptions of how change happens and to understand how the Programme was responsive to the complexity and fluidity of the region during the period of the Programme.

Four deep dives were included in data analysis to support planning for the future in areas of critical interest:

1. Integration of data on mega-trends: Did the design and operationalization of the RPAP make effective use of data on mega-trends, including increasing the evidence base during the RPAP period? Was this data used effectively to advance progress on the TRs?
2. Partnerships: Has the ESARO, through the RPAP expanded its partnership base to more strategically respond to emerging issues in the region and more effectively advance the UNFPA’s position and goals in the region?
3. Funding-Financing: Has the ESARO effectively supported Country Offices in shifting their resource and engagement models to align with the global SP? Has this shift meaningfully taken place?
4. Ending Sexual Transmission of HIV: How does the RPAP effectively advance this regional priority? Is this regional priority meaningfully balanced with and integrated with the global SP approach?

This was added to the future forecasting done by the region and the complexity analyses to develop findings and recommendations designed to support the Region’s strength in proactive anticipation and readiness for change and acceleration of results.

# 1.8 Challenges and Mitigation Measures

The Evaluation Team identified the following challenges and initiated mitigation measures:

*Participation in the Evaluation:* Ensuring all relevant people were available to participate in the evaluation was a challenge, given the short time period for data collection and the challenge of collecting UNFPA Regional Office personnel for focus groups and thematic interviews. This challenge occurred throughout the data collection phase and was mitigated by extending the data collection phase by approximately one month and returning to some thematic teams more than once to ensure data collection was robust. Country Office personnel were assigned to support the Evaluation Team in ensuring that country missions were complete.

*Differentiating between Country and Regional Office activities:* This was a challenge with respect to in-country missions. The Evaluation Team continuously worked to return conversations to Regional Programme support and programmes and worked with the assigned personnel to ensure that stakeholders had been part of regional programming or activities. The Evaluation Team further triangulated evidence to ensure it was understanding the Regional Office engagement in the activity was clear.

## 2. Context and Background

### 2.1 The Context of the East and Southern Africa Region

The East and Southern Africa (ESA) region is complex, with a broad array of demographic, geographic, economic, cultural and political contexts. These contexts are deeply relevant to the assessment of the UNFPA’s regional ‘readiness and positioning’ for the future. Regional Office documents, including the Regional Programme, Annual Reports and the Terms of Reference (ToR) [attached at Annex A], provide extensive and evidence-based descriptions of the context.



Over the past 10 years, the region has experienced a decreased in poverty, a 10-year increase in life expectancy, an increase in girls completing primary education and a higher proportion of women in decision-making roles. However, progress has been slow and unequal, with changing size, age and location of populations and impacts from armed conflict, COVID-19, and climate change. As of January 2020, over 45 million people in the region needed humanitarian assistance, and over 12 million people were recorded as being internally displaced.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> RPAP 2022-2025

The Region is home to almost 60% of Africa's population, at approximately 690 million people in 2023, which is expected to grow to 1.1 billion by 2050. Women constitute half of the population. The ESA region is largely young, with 0-14 years comprising 41% and 10-24 years 32%, respectively of the population.<sup>9</sup>

*Unmet Need for Family Planning:* More than 49 million women in the region who want to plan their families cannot get access to modern family planning.<sup>10</sup> Despite decline, the total fertility rate in the region remains high at 4.2 in 2023<sup>11</sup>, with varying rates across countries in the region. Adolescent pregnancy rates in Eastern and Southern Africa are twice the global average at 92 births per 1,000 girls.<sup>12</sup>

*Preventable Maternal Deaths:* 830 women and adolescent girls in the region die every day because of complications in pregnancy and childbirth. In some countries in the region, only a small proportion of women access antenatal, childbirth and postnatal care from skilled professionals. In other countries, access is higher but poor quality of care, limited of respectful care and/or a limited enabling work environment means that sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent health outcomes can still be poor. While maternal mortality was reduced in the region by over 50% between 1994 and 2017, this is not enough to meet the 2030 SDG goals. To achieve this target, the maternal mortality rate needs to decline by 12% per year, which is three times faster than the current pace.<sup>13</sup>

*Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices:* 9% of girls aged 20-24 years are married before the age of 15, while 35% are married before the age of 18.<sup>14</sup> An estimated 650 million girls and women alive today were married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays, 55 million of them residing in Eastern and Southern Africa, with the largest share in Ethiopia (17.3 million).<sup>15</sup> Child marriage also occurs among boys, with at least 1 in 10 young men being first married in childhood.<sup>16</sup>

Only 37% of sub-Saharan African countries have laws covering physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. Women encounter asset ownership disparities, with only 37 percent having bank accounts compared to 48 percent of men in the region.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> RPAP Midterm Report (MTR), 2023

<sup>10</sup> A World of Zeros, UNFPA ESARO 2023 Annual Report

<sup>11</sup> RPAP Midterm Report (MTR), 2023

<sup>12</sup> UNFPA. 2021. Adolescent Pregnancy. <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/topics/adolescent-pregnancy>

<sup>13</sup> A World of Zeros, UNFPA ESARO 2023 Annual Report

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> UNICEF. 2022. Child Marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa: A statistical overview and reflections on ending the practice. UNICEF, New York. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-in-eastern-and-southern-africa-a-statistical-overview-and-reflections-on-ending-the-practice/>

<sup>16</sup> UNICEF. 2022. Child Marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa: A statistical overview and reflections on ending the practice. UNICEF, New York. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-in-eastern-and-southern-africa-a-statistical-overview-and-reflections-on-ending-the-practice/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2024/01/04/transforming-the-lives-of-women-and-girls-in-afe-eastern-and-southern-africa>

In the region, in 14 out of the 23 ESA countries, one in four women on average has been subjected to physical or sexual violence in the previous year. The prevalence of lifetime experiences of forced sex among girls and women varies widely among SADC countries from 6 per cent to 27 per cent.<sup>18</sup> The most likely perpetrators of forced sex against girls and women within SADC countries are those closest to them, most commonly intimate partners and friends.<sup>19</sup>

It is estimated that approximately 200 million girls and women globally have undergone some form of female genital mutilation (FGM), including in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. While there was a reduction in this harmful practice before COVID-19, the pandemic increased the practice again, with an additional two million girls at risk (a 33% reduction in progress towards ending the practice).<sup>20</sup>

*Sexual Transmission of HIV:* The Region accounts for more than half of the people in the world living with HIV, at 20.8 million people in 2022. In 2022, the region reported 500,000 new infections, a reduction of more than 230,000 since 2019. Women aged 15 years and over still account for 61% of all people living with HIV in the region.<sup>21</sup> The annual mortality related to AIDS translates to over 1300 deaths per day. Studies have found that the risk of dying from COVID-19 among people with HIV was double that of the general population. COVID-19 lockdowns and other restrictions disrupted HIV testing and led to drops in diagnoses and referrals to HIV treatment.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.2 The UNFPA Strategic Plan

The UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 is the second in a series of three strategic plans intended to build a foundation, accelerate, then ultimately achieve three transformative results: (a) ending unmet need for family planning; (b) ending preventable maternal deaths; and (c) ending gender-based violence and all harmful practices, including female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage. The goal of the Strategic Plan is universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and acceleration of the implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action. The Strategic Plan identifies six interconnected outputs (a) policy and accountability; (b) quality of care and services; (c) gender and social norms; (d) population change and data; (e) humanitarian action; and (f) adolescents and youth. The Plan also includes three organizational effectiveness and efficiency (OEE) outputs designed to adapt to a constantly evolving landscape: improved programming for results, optimized management of resources, and expanded partnerships for impact. In order to achieve these results, the Strategic Plan identifies six accelerators and twelve strategic shifts.

Accelerators:

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. 2023. Violence against Girls, Boys and Women in Southern Africa: A statistical profile, UNICEF, New York.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. 2023. Violence against Girls, Boys and Women in Southern Africa: A statistical profile, UNICEF, New York.

<sup>20</sup> <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/topics/female-genital-mutilation>

<sup>21</sup> A World of Zeros, UNFPA ESARO 2023 Annual Report

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/UNAIDS\\_FactSheet\\_en.pdf](https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/UNAIDS_FactSheet_en.pdf)

- a) human rights based and gender transformative approaches
- b) Innovation and digitalization
- c) Partnership, South-South and Triangular Cooperation and financing
- d) Data and evidence
- e) Leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest left behind first
- f) Resilience, adaptation and complementarity among development, humanitarian and peace-responsive efforts

#### Strategic Shifts:

- 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
- 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
- l) Increasing the focus on joint accountability, in line with United Nations reforms, principles and practices

The SPE Inception Report notes that the strategic shifts are a mix of different types of actions and, in some cases, overlap with the accelerators. Many of the strategic shifts do not represent ‘shifts’ in that they are already a core part of UNFPA’s work and approach (such as Leaving No One Behind). Some accelerators and strategic shifts are more internally focused, i.e. “shifts in what UNFPA does” and some are more focused on the UNFPA’s external relations, i.e. “shifts in the way UNFPA leverages the work and resources of others”.

The SPE Inception Report also identified a number of enablers (cross-cutting coordination, strategic communication, resource mobilization, knowledge management, business operations and M&E) to operationalize the strategic shifts and accelerators.



## 2.3 The UNFPA ESAR Regional Programme Action Plan (2022-2025)

The UNFPA ESARO Regional Programme Action Plan 2022-2025 (RPAP) provides support to the governments of 23 countries and regional institutions in East and Southern Africa. Within the context of ‘building forward better’ from the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerating progress towards the transformative results, the RPAP aims to contribute to the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 goal of achieving access to sexual and reproductive health rights for all, and accelerate the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, with a focus on young people. It also directly contributes to SDGs 1, 3, 5, 10, 13, 16, 17 and the three UNFPA Strategic Plan outcomes: (a) by 2025, the reduction in the unmet need for family planning has accelerated; (b) by 2025, the reduction in preventable maternal deaths has accelerated; and (c) by 2025, the reduction in

gender-based violence and harmful practices has accelerated; as well as a fourth regional outcome on ending sexual transmission of HIV.

Figure 5: Regional Programme Common Pathways, prepared by the Regional Office



Taking into account the evidence of ‘what works’, the Regional Programme Action Plan has prioritized six common pathways and interrelated Outputs to accelerate progress towards the Transformative Results, as seen at Figure 5. In alignment with the Global Strategic Plan, all the outputs contribute to the achievement of each outcome, with a multidimensional, ‘many-to-many’ relationship with these outcomes.

In the RPAP, strategic interventions designed to

Source: Regional Programme Change Story, attached at Annex B achieve the outputs are underpinned by six accelerators, drawn from the UNFPA Strategic Plan: innovation including digitalization; partnerships, including South-South and triangular cooperation and financing; human rights-based and gender transformative approaches; leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first; resilience, nexus and adaptation; data, demographic dynamics and intelligence. The relationship between outcomes, outputs, interventions and accelerators is set out below in Table 3.

The full Change Story prepared by the RO is attached at Annex B.

Table 3: RPAP Theory of Change, prepared by Evaluation Team

Goal	Universal access to sexual reproductive health and reproductive rights and accelerate the achievement of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development					
Outcomes	By 2025: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The reduction in the unmet need for family planning has accelerated</li> <li>• The reduction of preventable maternal deaths has accelerated</li> <li>• The reduction of gender-based violence and harmful practices has accelerated</li> <li>• The reduction in the sexual transmission of HIV has accelerated</li> </ul>					
Outputs	Enhancing SRHR policy, financing and accountability	Improved provision of people-centred quality, comprehensive SRHR information and services	Address harmful gender, social-cultural norms and discriminatory practices affecting SRHR	Enhanced use of population dynamics and data for decision making on SRHR in the context of ICPD and SDGs	Strengthened SRHR and systems resilience in the context of humanitarian response and peace building	Improved empowerment and participation of adolescents and youth for realization of universal SRHR
RPAP Strategic Interventions						
Accelerators	Innovation and digitalization, Partnerships including South-South and triangular cooperation and financing, Human rights based and gender transformative approaches, Leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first, Resilience, nexus and adaptation, Data					

Source: RPAP Change Story found at Annex B

The RPAP integrated the accelerators and strategic shifts across its programme outputs and OEEs. The RPAP outputs with planned interventions and assigned resources is at Annex C.

The RPAP targeted and engaged a broad range of stakeholders and partners (both duty bearers and rights holders) at continental, regional, national and local levels, across government, civil society, healthcare, education, academia, statistics and data, and IFIs. The RPAP included a number of key continental and regional joint programmes with other UN partners, as well as strategic consideration of the role of partners in working together on the accelerators. A list of the stakeholders consulted by the Evaluation Team is attached at Annex D.

# 3. Findings

## 3.1 Accelerators

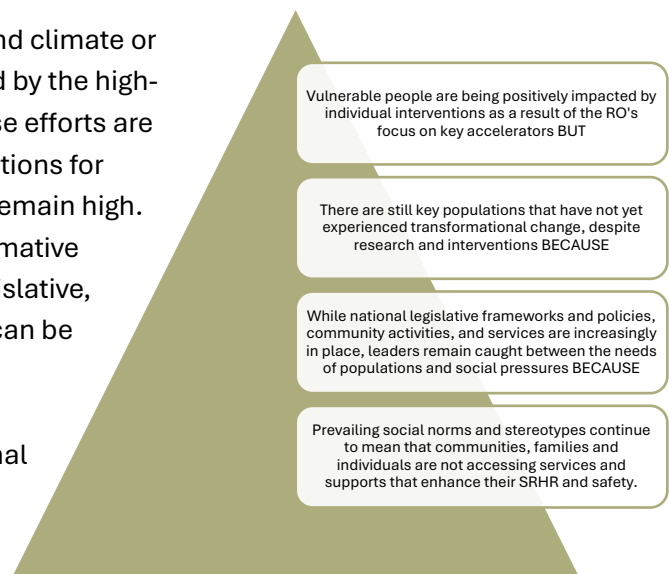
*EQ1: To what extent are current accelerators effective, coherent and adaptable to evolving challenges to advance UNFPA's results?*

### Summary:

The ESA Regional Office's focus on key accelerators has generated meaningful results. The RPAP incorporated all six accelerators from the Strategic Plan: innovation including digitalization; partnerships including South-South and triangular cooperation and financing; human rights based and gender transformative approaches; leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first; resilience, nexus and adaptation; data, demographic dynamics and intelligence. The RPAP output activities have integrated the accelerators and adapted to the context over the period of the Programme, both

geographically and in response to disruptions, including COVID-19 and climate or conflict-related crises. However, as exemplified by the high-level conclusion diagram at Figure 6, while these efforts are reaching the top layer, there are still key populations for whom the risks related to SRHR, HIV and GBV remain high. This reality is despite RO programming and normative work that has made significant advances in legislative, policy and service provision. Some of this gap can be attributed to the need for greater integration of accelerators such as data, innovation and partnerships across the strategic and operational structure of the organization. Gaps related to young people and HIV infection in key populations require a greater focus on addressing social norms and the broader application of human rights based and gender transformative approaches.

Figure 6: The impact of the RO's focus on key accelerators and outstanding issues, prepared by the Evaluation Team



Sources: RO results documents including annual reports, stakeholder and personnel interviews. These statements are explored more in findings 1-7.

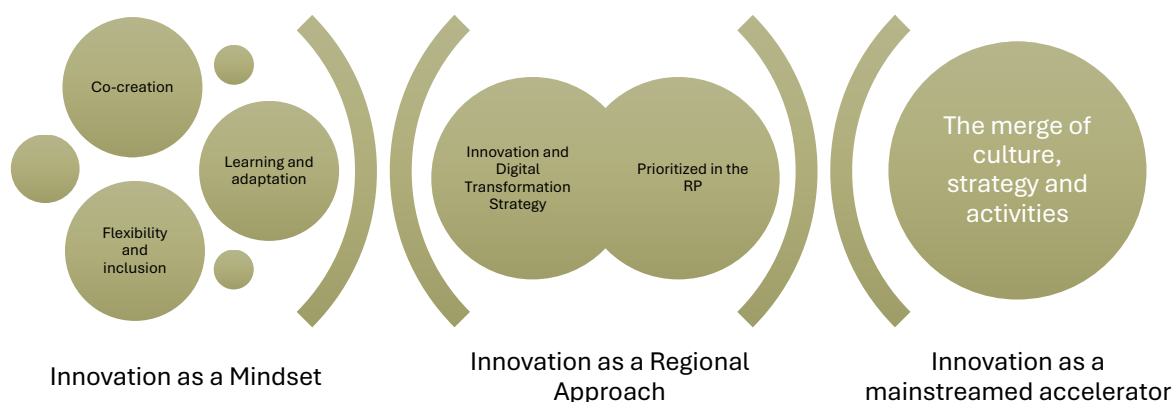
(Findings 1-7)

**Finding 1: Foundational elements of innovation have been put in place by the Regional Office and are ready for greater integration.**

Innovation and digitalization is one of six accelerators of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which the Regional Office has adopted for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. This cross-cutting area of work is considered an enabler as well as a goal in the ESARO Change Theory RP 2022-2025 and corresponds to strategic shifts (b) Integrating the effects of megatrends, such as climate change, demographic shifts, inequalities and digitalization into programming and (c) Increasing the focus on ‘populations left behind’ and emphasizing ‘reaching those furthest behind first’.

There are visible innovation elements in the work across the region that have positive implications. Innovation in the region could be characterized as a mindset and as a regional approach. While each of these elements are having separate positive impacts, they have not yet merged together sufficient to accelerate progress, as depicted in Figure 7.

Figure 7: The ESA Regional Office’s innovation journey from activities to accelerator, prepared by the Evaluation Team



Source: ESARO Innovation Strategy, KIIs with regional and country office personnel

*Innovation as a Mindset:* The Evaluation Team observed, and it was confirmed by stakeholders across the region, that the RO and COs already have elements of an innovation culture. Stakeholders pointed to co-creation, learning and adaptation, and flexibility as highlights of working with UNFPA, and as reasons for realized successes. ROs and COs routinely prioritized evidence-based approaches and consultation with affected populations in program design. Indeed, a number of stakeholders lauded UNFPA as the most engaged and inclusive partner they worked with. This innovation culture has permeated across the region and should be further cultivated. It is noteworthy, however, that RO and CO personnel do not necessarily equate these qualities and approaches with ‘innovation’ - a term that has come to mean something separate from business-as-usual programming. As a result, personnel hold themselves separate from innovation as a function or responsibility.

*Innovation as a Regional Approach:* The Evaluation Team noted that, although innovation is specifically mentioned in the Strategic Plan as an accelerator, there is no corporate guide providing instruction and the HQ Innovation Unit is relatively new. The RO has made multiple efforts to contextualize innovation into the Regional Programme. It specifically incorporates innovation across the outputs, including direct references:

Output 6: equipping young people to exercise social innovation - innovation solutions for SRHR

Output 5: innovative SRH - no other language that helps

Output 4: enhance use of innovation and digitization in generation, analysis and use of population data and evidence to guide contributions to the SDGs

Output 3: enhance innovation for taking high impact practices to scale to improve women and girls' agency, bodily autonomy and decision making

The Evaluation Team observed a number of innovative programming approaches across the thematic output areas that were yielding success, such as digitizing the commodities tracking and Last Mile Assurance, using AI to develop midwife training, the Development Impact Bond and other innovative financing approaches, innovative commodity delivery approaches including drones and bodabodas<sup>23</sup>, the use of social media platforms to engage young people, and sharing tablets and best practices to gather census data.

Innovation has also been embraced as a standalone driver of solutions. The Regional Office produced the Innovation2.0 futures paper which informed the Regional Office's approach. The RO identified an Innovation Specialist, produced an Innovation Strategy in 2022, created a team of Innovation Focal Points in Country Offices, and conducted a series of HackLabs hackathons. These are important steps. HackLabs have intrinsic value in engaging and capacitating young entrepreneurs and bringing new voices and ideas to challenging issues such as FGM. The Evaluation Team met with entrepreneurs who had participated in the HackLabs, including those whose initiatives were ongoing, viable and continuing to provide impact to the target audiences. We also met with Innovation Focal Points in Country Offices and heard about the innovation capacity building efforts based in the Regional Office.

However, despite these efforts and activities, it is not clear to the Evaluation Team that the innovation approach has matured to the point that is able to make impactful change at scale as an accelerator. There are some specific issues. In particular, limited Country Office ownership in the innovation process and relationships with the local entrepreneurs. Country Offices indicate that they were not involved in the design or selection stage. There was no larger plan or commitment in the Hackathons that, after the initial seed money, there would be ongoing engagement or

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<sup>23</sup> Motorcycle taxis that are popularly used instead of other public transport - they can easily navigate through traffic congestion and narrow streets, reducing travel time; they can also reach areas that are not accessible by buses or cars, providing crucial transport in both urban and rural areas; they offer door-to-door service, which is particularly convenient for passengers with specific destinations; they are quicker for short distances, helping passengers save time, especially in busy urban environment

partnership with UNFPA to scale the interventions. By design therefore the good innovations brought to light through the Regional Office Innovation Unit were not set up to succeed in country. In other words, while the innovation process is supported through the Hacklabs model, the endgame of accelerating results on the issue is not yet realized. This finding is supported by the evaluation of the HackLabs conducted in May 2024.<sup>24</sup>

There are flaws in the current model that keeps innovation largely siloed between Regional Office and Country Offices, and between innovation and programming. However, the foundations - an innovation skillset, flexible programming models and a dedicated innovation strategy - are there for the region to build upon.

#### A Note of Caution about Innovation and Young People

One of the stated benefits in both the RP and the Innovation Strategy of conducting innovation activities is to engage and capacitate young people. However, engaging young people also creates an extra duty of care for UNFPA, as young people cannot necessarily be treated as institutional or not-for-profit partners. Young people do not always have the experience or means to be resilient in the face of delayed payment, loss of community standing or credibility, or criticisms for taking politically/socially unpopular stances.

The HackLabs created certain capacity and notoriety for young people but did not include a plan for supporting those young people past the initial seed money and early events. (Sources: KIs with HackLab participants, RO and CO personnel, HackLabs evaluation)

*“Finally, and from a humane perspective, it is not acceptable to sell the dream of becoming a successful (read rich) entrepreneur to a struggling youth so a few success stories can be used for raising funds for more development programs - surely more can be done to support the youth at scale and in a transformative way.” [HackLabs evaluation p67]*

**Finding 2: ESARO has made use of regional partnerships, and partnership guidance to Country Offices, to advance the TRs and achieve results. There is opportunity for the RO to reconceptualize some relationships to increase their strategic advantages.**

Partnerships including South-South and triangular cooperation and financing is one of six accelerators of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which the Regional Office has adopted for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. This cross-cutting area of work is considered an enabler as well as an outcome in the ESARO Change Theory RP 2022-2025 and corresponds to strategic shifts (j) Shifting the focus from funding the ICPD agenda to financing the ICPD agenda and (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.

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<sup>24</sup> Hacklabs 2021-2023 Evaluation Final Report, June 2024 at p 66

ESARO has developed strategic relationships with an array of partners, and has provided support to Country Offices in advancing in-country partnerships. However, there are missed or future opportunities to deepen these relationships as a means of accelerating progress.

As part of the RPAP, ESARO developed a Resource Mobilization and Partnerships strategy. In that strategy, the ESARO identified that a broader range of partners and more UN agency joint programming were key lessons to take forward. The strategy contains an analysis of the potential for partnerships with private sector, philanthropic organizations and foundations, high net worth individuals, regional economic communities and parliamentarians, academia and scientific institutions and civil society organizations. This analysis is rich and thoughtful, setting out key purposes and principles.

The Evaluation Team assessed the current relationships with the categories of partners with varied outcomes, set out below at Table 4.

Table 4: ESARO Current Relationships Analysis, prepared by the Evaluation Team

Partner Type	Current Relationship	Opportunities	Regional Examples
Continental and Regional Fora	A strength Long-term partners achieving normative and advocacy change	Support for financing models Ally against anti-rights pushback	AU SADC EAC
Civil Society Organizations	An area for growth Implementing partners at the activity level	Advocacy Ally against anti-rights pushback	AfriYAN AfriLabs
Private Sector	An area for growth Implementing at the country level only	Innovative financing models	
Academia	Some strength Implementing partners for research	Increased evidence generation and futures thinking Broader partnership options Ally against anti-rights pushback	AFIDEP University of Cape Town Queen Mary University of London

Source: RO documents and KIIs with personnel and partners

In addition to the regional partnerships, ESARO also supported Country Office partnerships through the provision of evidence, strategy, thought leadership and advocacy. This enabled Country Offices to build strong relationships with relevant government departments focusing on health, youth, education and gender at national and sub-national levels. [See Annex I for an example from Kenya.] Government representatives interviewed reported a good working relationship with UNFPA. Technical working groups provided good platforms for bringing partners together to coordinate their work and demonstrate UNFPA leadership. Although government representatives across the region commended the good relationship with UNFPA, they also noted some challenges including reduced funds for existing programmes and/or the loss of UNFPA as a funder. Country Office staff noted challenges in engaging with government partners in relation to shifting political priorities and social norms. These are areas for Regional Office support.

For more analysis on the Regional Office’s use of the partnerships accelerator, see Annex J.



### Answering the Deep Dive Questions

*Has ESARO, through the RP, expanded its partnership base to more strategically respond to emerging issues in the region and more effectively advance the UNFPA's position and goals in the region?*

Partly. The ESARO has advanced its strategic relationships with the regional and continental governance bodies, with meaningful normative outcomes at the regional and country levels. However, there is still work to do to strengthen partnerships with the civil society in the face of anti-rights pushback and to engage more strategically with diverse partners including private sector partners in innovative financing.

**Finding 3: The Regional Office has used human-rights based and gender transformative approaches to advance the needs of women and girls but there is more work to be done.**

Human rights based and gender transformative approaches is one of six accelerators of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which the Regional Office has adopted for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. This cross-cutting area of work is considered an enabler as well as an outcome in the ESARO Change Theory RP 2022-2025 and corresponds to strategic shift (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.

In Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA), women and girls disproportionately bear the weight of inequalities in education, economic empowerment, political representation, and the prevalence of gender-based violence. Women bear a heavier burden of unpaid domestic and care work, face limited involvement in household decisions and are overwhelmingly the victims of GBV. In the region, in 14 out of the 23 ESA countries, one in four women on average has been subjected to physical or sexual violence in the previous year. Moreover, they encounter asset ownership disparities, with only 37 percent having bank accounts compared to 48 percent of men in the region.<sup>25</sup> International, regional, and national legal frameworks play a vital role in safeguarding women's rights, particularly their sexual and reproductive health rights. Although numerous East and Southern African countries have ratified these agreements, full alignment with national laws, particularly concerning land ownership and inheritance rights, is still lacking.

Against this context, ESARO has made critical advancements on gender and social norms transformation across the Regional Programme outputs 1-3, as evidenced by the interviews with Regional and Country personnel, stakeholders and document review and summarized at Annex K. These advancements, contributed to strengthening the continental and regional SRHR frameworks,

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2024/01/04/transforming-the-lives-of-women-and-girls-in-afe-eastern-and-southern-africa>



supported national laws, policies and roadmaps, creating robust frameworks for responding to GBV, provided fact sheets, guidance notes and advocacy tools, expanded access to services through community sensitization and support for referral pathways, provided vital resources to providers, strengthened accountability, and encouraged dialogue.

Moving forward, this normative framework and strengthened response network will be important to reinforce. Stakeholders and UNFPA personnel all identified the increasing challenge to gender and social norms that is presented by anti-rights pushback across the continent. Their suggested responses to the challenge included continuing to ensure that the regional economic communities are engaged in developing and advocating for normative frameworks, strengthening the advocacy skills of young people, and continuing to develop strategies and tools to support Country Office work on increased community sensitization on dividends for transforming negative harmful practices and advancing human rights, creating safe spaces for skilled medical practitioners to provide services, and engaging parliamentarians in education.<sup>26</sup>

**Finding 4: Programmes are strategically designed to address issues of inequality so that they reach marginalized, vulnerable and hard to reach populations, including people with disabilities.**

Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind First is one of six accelerators of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which the Regional Office has adopted for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. This cross-cutting area of work is considered an enabler as well as an outcome in the ESARO Change Theory RP 2022-2025 and corresponds to strategic shift (c) Increasing the focus on ‘populations left behind’ and emphasizing ‘reaching those furthest behind first’, and has been impacted by the use of data.

The work of ESARO is already necessarily aimed at people who, for socio-economic, cultural, geographic or demographic reasons, are unable to access necessary information, services and support. This first level of targeting populations is a strength of ESARO, which has made positive use of data and evidence to identify subnational regions and key populations for programming. ESARO has taken needs identification beyond this first level to understand who is still not reached after the first level of targeting. For example, while youth and adolescents are a key target group, programming across the region has honed in on rural young people, those in particular religious or closed communities, those in conflict zones, and those outside the education system. See Annex I for an example of LNOB in action in Ethiopia.

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<sup>26</sup> In particular, this evidence was provided by representatives of the regional economic communities, country office personnel, and medical personnel.

Data is important to not only define and identify the most vulnerable, marginalized and the ones who are farthest behind but also to raise their visibility. ESARO uses data and evidence to identify vulnerable populations through:

- Advocacy and technical support for inclusion of disability questions in censuses
- Triangulation of data from different sources such as census, surveys and administrative data
- Innovations in the form of integrating census data (Population Estimates) with GIS
- Use of geo-referenced data by the RO to identify hard-to-reach populations and analyzing the data by the degree of marginalization to understand inequality in access to services

Combining the different data sets (service utilization, census and DHS) and geo-referencing them, helps define, identify and locate inequality and exclusion. RO strengthens capacities at regional and national levels to improve the generation, analysis, dissemination and use of data to leave no one behind. The joint programme 2gether4SRHR is an example of the use of data in ongoing refinement of interventions and strategy, as it has used LNOB data to reframe the next round of programming to specifically target key vulnerable population groups.

The Innovation and Digital Transformation Strategy also targets the LNOB principle with promising results. Innovations such as the use of AI to scrape social media for SRH ‘hotspots’ will support the identification of suddenly vulnerable groups. Likewise, an innovative app using school attendance data will allow service providers to prevent mass FGM ceremonies by alerting them when vulnerable girls suddenly stop attending school in certain communities. While neither of these innovations have progressed with UNFPA, they are an indication of the priority placed on LNOB, as well as the region’s potential.

Disability inclusion has been mainstreamed across the Regional Office programming and technical support to Country Offices. Inclusive approaches to participation (using media and local vernacular, engaging community leaders, grassroots organizations, etc.) have been adopted at the regional and country office levels to strategically address disability across different interventions. [For an example of disability inclusion in Namibia, see Annex I.] Across the region, there is shared programming that targets vulnerable populations, especially vulnerable young people, through mobile clinics, One-Stop Centres, supply delivery by drones, motorcycle ambulance services and other innovative service delivery models.

However, despite the overarching strengths of the Regional Office, there are some marginalized groups that remain a challenge to address. In particular, the Regional Office and Country Offices continue to wrestle with addressing the vulnerability of the LGBTQ+ community, in the face of national policies and laws, political unwillingness and anti-rights backlash. Both the Regional Office and Country Offices are skilled at navigating these waters. Country Office personnel indicated that they rely on the Regional Office evidence generation and advocacy powers at the regional level to provide support for their national conversations.

Finding 5: The RO has recognized the critical need for resilience and preparedness across the region and has met the need with a variety of responses. The broad reach of the humanitarian portfolio could be expanded through greater regional integration of resilience and response planning capacity.

Resilience, nexus and adaptation is one of six accelerators of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which the Regional Office has adopted for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. This cross-cutting area of work corresponds to strategic shifts (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 and (f) Mainstreaming resilience, prevention, preparedness and early action, and emphasizing the complementarity between humanitarian, development and peace-responsive interventions.

The ESA region has experienced a multitude of risks and crises that have created the need for humanitarian response, including large and small-scale emergencies related to climate change, acute and protracted conflicts and fragile settings. The experience of the region has also fluctuated, as more countries experience previously unfamiliar storms, floods and droughts. 60% of preventable maternal deaths and 45% of newborn deaths take place in countries affected by recent conflict, natural disaster, or both. The risks of unsafe abortions, unsafe deliveries and GBV increase during an emergency. UNFPA in the region has worked extensively to build the evidence base and make the case that lifesaving SRH services are a critical component of emergency humanitarian response, and develop responses.

ESARO's humanitarian work in the region has been multi-faceted and interlinked. The Regional Office team has worked intersectionally with the SRH and P&D teams to build the regional humanitarian portfolio which spans evidence generation, thought leadership, technical guidance for country offices in line with the Technical Assistance Strategy, commodities management, training and capacity building and advocacy. The summary at Annex K provides examples of the contribution the ESARO humanitarian work has made in the region.

The results of this work are impressive and have advanced UNFPA's humanitarian position in the region. The impacts of technical assistance provided to COs was noted in the assessment of the Technical Assistance Strategy conducted in November 2023.<sup>27</sup>

There are core components of future readiness for humanitarian response that are recognized by the ESARO team and not yet fully in place in the region. In large measure, these can be summarized by needing to lean in more actively to the HDP nexus or alternately put, recognizing the intersectionality of humanitarian work across all of ESARO's thematic and operational outputs.

Internally, the staffing structure in the region (both at RO and CO levels) is not built to have scalable humanitarian teams ready to launch, nor is this advisable. Rather, it is critical that existing CO staff

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<sup>27</sup> Analysis of ESARO Technical Assistance Strategy and practice: April 2022-Mid November 2023, provided by the RO, at slide 8

are trained and prepared to respond to crises as they occur in the country. Successful examples of this are already in place in Madagascar and Mozambique. This was also noted in the Technical Assistance Strategy, which identified the benefits of having trained CO staff who could support across the region and encouraged a skill mapping exercise.<sup>28</sup>

Funding that includes SRHR and GBV humanitarian response is not in the government action plan and budget in most of the region’s countries, and is not always included in donor funding. Increased advocacy is required to ensure funding is in place and available specifically for SRHR and GBV when crises occur.

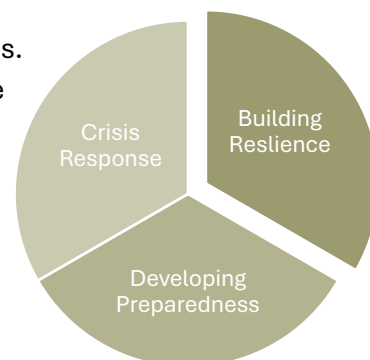
As noted in the policy brief on readiness planning, the key is advanced planning and resilience. This is a tool and skill set that is not meaningfully in place in many countries in the region, either at the Country Office nor with partners. There is opportunity in programme design across all thematic areas to be adding adaptability in the face of crises in to all programme plans. [See Annex I for an example of readiness in Madagascar and Mozambique and lessons learned from COVID-19 in Zimbabwe]

Externally, the ESARO has recognized that it does not play a leading role in humanitarian response coordination in the region. Rather, it has taken the path of joining key technical and leadership tables across the UN system and with other humanitarian partners to assert the importance of SRHR in humanitarian response. This ongoing presence, including quarterly meetings with humanitarian partners, has been a positive model. However, given the scale and scope of the humanitarian challenges in the region, it will be important for ESARO to find more ways to bring partners to the table. This is especially true in those countries that are not considered ongoing humanitarian challenges but rather experience situational crises related to climate or disease.

There is need and opportunity to better integrate innovation, digital technology and young innovators into preparedness planning and disaster response.

ESARO expanded its humanitarian response capacity significantly during the period of the RPAP, including shifting conventional mindsets about the inclusion of SRHR in crisis response and the role of UNFPA in humanitarian dialogues. This effort resulted in SRHR supports to people living in crisis, normative and policy changes that include the MISIP, and the introduction of preparedness discussions related to SRHR, such as strategic commodity movements. As identified in Figure 8, the Regional Office has identified the next wave of UNFPA’s role in humanitarian response required for the region – entrenching preparedness and resilience across the region in recognition of the fluidity of the region – but the

Figure 8: The building blocks of ESARO’s humanitarian response capacity, prepared by the Evaluation Team,



Source: Policy Brief on Readiness, personnel interviews

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

internal requirements required for this, such as staff agility, are not yet fully in place and externally, it will be critical to engage partners more fully.

**Finding 6: The use of data and evidence is a comparative advantage for ESARO.**

Data and evidence is one of six accelerators of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which the Regional Office has adopted for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. This cross-cutting area of work corresponds to almost all of the strategic shifts and supports all of the other accelerators.

The review of the 2018-2021 regional programme underscored the importance of strengthened regional and national capacity for the generation, analysis and use of actionable data and evidence to scale up high-impact practices and reach those left furthest behind. In the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-25, a key focus was the enhanced use of population change and data for decision-making in the context of the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs and mainstreaming evidence, research, knowledge, scenario setting, future casting, innovation and digital solutions into tailored policies, programmes and business practices. The RPAP 2022-25 also stipulates to strengthen capacities at regional and national levels to improve the generation, analysis, dissemination and use of data to leave no one behind. At the same time, the Regional Office also advances multisectoral policies that leverage population dynamics across the life cycle and strengthen the translation of disaggregated data, statistics, research and evidence into targeted policy actions.

The P&D work is strategically divided into three work streams:

- Population Change – Population dynamics and policies and megatrends;
- Population data and evidence;
- GIS and other technological innovations.

This division of work into three streams has lent the work comprehensiveness, relevance and sharpness. As found in the MTR, work areas are well defined, processes are in place, strategic partnerships have been forged, support mechanisms have been established, and all the output indicators and outcomes have either been activated, achieved, or will be achieved by the end of the RPAP.

The RO P&D work focuses on upward (e.g. providing knowledge pieces to HQ) as well as downward contributions (e.g. context based guidelines and support to countries). The three identified strategies to strengthen the capacity to generate and use data to scale of high impact interventions are: peer learning and exchange within and beyond the region; showcasing the work undertaken at the RO; and strengthening strategic partnerships to ensure scaled-up efforts in population data and demographic change, including with academia.

The work of the P&D team at the Regional Office has been an integral part of the RPAP ability to move on the accelerators and strategic shifts, through the creation of tools, analytics, advocacy points, learning opportunities and of course the core work of supporting census taking and building national statistics capacities. They have supported scaling by providing direct hands-on support to countries – both COs and partners – by building the institutional strength of UNFPA in supporting population and housing censuses, civil registration and vital statistics, demographic health surveys, and periodic measurement and assessment of progress towards the three transformative results, voluntary ICPD25 commitments and the SDGs. However, there is still opportunity to enhance the usage of data and strategic thinking as it is implemented at the Country Office level. The quality of administrative data and country capacity to use it is differentiated across the region. For example, Zimbabwe has been successful in using data to improve supply chain management, while Namibia is struggling with stockouts. It is not clear that there is a concerted effort from the Regional Office to improve data in this area.

The Regional Office has developed critical evidence related to the megatrends and the challenges facing the region. Stakeholders and personnel across the region and the countries noted this team as a core part of the Regional Office approach, which is explored further at Finding 9.

More broadly, the use of data and evidence was apparent across the thematic teams of the Regional Office and, indeed, was highlighted in stakeholder interviews as one of the ESARO's comparative advantages – that they always have strong evidence to back up their position and support programming. This was corroborated by a review of the P&D unit's documents and products., which showed the ways in which data and evidence have been used to accelerate progress, including:

- All but four countries in the region have completed the current round of the census. This included the undertaking of the first digital census in six countries and Regional Office innovation in the form of sharing the technical know-how and equipment between countries.
- The Regional Office encouraged countries in analysis and thematic reports (e.g. Gender, Adolescents and Youth, and Disability).
- The RO supported CRVS across the region through training CO personnel and national governments on the quality of data and use of administrative records for the generation of vital statistics (e.g. marriage and divorce), a critical need as the regional MTR indicated that weak capacity and coverage of routine management information systems such as HMIS, GBV-IMS in most countries continues to limit evidence-informed policy and programmes.
- Thematic units were supported by the P&D unit with surveys, data and studies. For example, the Spotlight Initiative ran a survey designed in four countries in addition to DHS and qualitative research on masculinity.
- An internal ESA Data for Action platform containing 55 indicators for 23 countries was developed and published online for use in supporting monitoring of progress towards the TRs, which is a strong example of data integration in one place for development planning and humanitarian response.

- Together, the RO and COs created a tool during COVID-19 to assess civil protection in countries.
- The P&D unit undertakes and promotes data analysis and georeferencing of the data to advance need-focused interventions.

In other words, data and evidence – and in particular, population data – is a core dependency of the work of the Regional Office and the UNFPA across the region and a core deliverable for partners.

In addition to the accelerating work listed above, the RO provides Country Offices with knowledge generation and sharing, capacity-building programmes, guidelines and guidance notes (e.g. a guidance note for countries to include population policies in the National Development Plans, a guidance note and checklist on how to include SRHR reporting in VNRs), and connection to experts. However, at the Country Office level, personnel identified that there is still work to be done to bridge the gap between the RO’s capacity production and the needs of the countries. The data at the country level is, in some cases, old/outdated and in other cases, under utilized. For example, the last DHS in Namibia took place in 2013. Although censuses were conducted, in many countries the data has not been fully analyzed and capacities have not been fully built to use the data for national development planning. Although it was suggested by some interviewees that countries have generated demographic intelligence, personnel interviews and document review indicated that there was limited population situation analysis at the country level, which Country Office personnel indicated was, at least in part, because this level of analysis had not been required by the Regional Office.

As explored at Finding 8, there is a perception that the Strategic Plan’s divergence from population and development as a core deliverable has undercut the UNFPA’s attention and resourcing for this core area. The Population and Development team identified that they have lost personnel and are underfunded. Similarly, partners across the region noted the reduction in attention and resources for data and evidence. These perceptions and experiences are evidenced by the gaps in data work listed above. It will be critical for the organization as a whole to rationalize this core work with its stated priorities in order to continue to maintain the high degree of productivity and value this Region has provided in terms of data and evidence.

**Finding 7: The Regional Office integrated the accelerators and strategic shifts in RPAP Output 6, focused on adolescents and youth. Despite advances, the negative realities for young people across the TRs persist and require greater focus on the influence of social norms.**

The RPAP integrated the accelerators and strategic shifts across the output areas. RPAP Output 6: Improved empowerment and participation of adolescents and youth for realization of universal SRHR integrated accelerators (partnerships, human rights and gender transformative approaches, innovation) and strategic shifts (Scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services, as part of universal health coverage plans, 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).

### *Partnerships Accelerated Normative Advancement*

Given the region's youthful population, there is value in the RO's focus on working with partners to strengthen youth-led advocacy and policy-dialogue at regional and national levels. Programmes such as Safeguard Young People (SYP) supported the voices of young people, through youth networks and young parliamentarians, influencing policy, and improving coordination and relationships at both the national and regional levels.<sup>29</sup>

At policy level, the SYP programme, through the advocacy of young people, has highlighted the link between poor adolescent SRHR outcomes and high maternal mortality and morbidity rates. As a result, adolescent health has been included as a key component in the renewed Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa (CARMMA) led by the African Union<sup>30</sup>. The SYP programme has fostered better coordination at the country level and has built trustworthy partnerships between UNFPA and Regional Economic Communities, namely, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the East African Community (EAC).

Young network participants in Zimbabwe told the Evaluation Team that, through the programme, they were able to advocate for and achieve meaningful changes to national SRH laws and policies pertaining to young people. Youth leadership, participation and accountability initiatives have established parliamentary youth caucus in some countries in the region, with some of the countries creating a youth desk in every ministry.<sup>31</sup>

The Region's Technical Coordination Group (TCG) developed the regional accountability framework to measure progress toward the achievement of the agreed set of nine targets at the regional level in relation to the 2018 ESA Commitment's targets, and also to provide the basis for the monitoring of the commitment by other stakeholders<sup>32</sup>, to reporting to SADC and EAC.

### *Human Rights and Gender Transformative Approaches, Scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services*

ESARO has focused on consolidating gains in Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) for in-school and out-of-school youth, with increased linkage to adolescent-responsive and youth-friendly information and services. Several countries in the region have integrated CSE into their national education policies and curricula, ensuring that students receive consistent and accurate information. A comprehensive sexuality education manual was developed for young people in- and

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<sup>29</sup> UNFPA. 2022. Harmonization of the Legal Environment on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in East and Southern Africa: A Review of 23 countries.

<sup>30</sup> UNFPA. (2023). 2022–2025 Global and Regional Programmes East and Southern Africa Regional Programme Action Plan: Midterm Review Report. United Nations Population Fund.

<sup>31</sup> UNFPA. 2021. Change Story: East and Southern Africa Regional Programme 2022-2025

<sup>32</sup> UNFPA. (2021) Resilient Futures: Young People, The Climate Crisis and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.



out-of- school, which is reviewed every year and is examinable in some countries. In addition, the RO has focused on ensuring that educators are trained on how to effectively deliver CSE, enhancing the quality and consistency of education through the development of training and manuals.

ESARO supports youth networks to provide SRH information and services in safe spaces to students in tertiary institutions. The networks engage in initiatives related to SRH, education, and the welfare of young people and coordinate a CSE curriculum for tertiary institutions and have focal persons and peer educators whose strength is the capacity building in SRH and CSE. Successful youth networks, such as the Students and Youth Working on Reproductive Health Action Team (SAYWHAT) in Zimbabwe, have reached thousands of students at critical learning and life decision points. SAYWHAT is now extending its work to other Southern African countries. AfriYAN is an autonomous network that works with development agencies and youth representatives to advocate on various social issues, particularly adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health, and advance broader youth engagement in development issues in the region. [See Annex I for a success story from Namibia.]

Youth-led accountability and convening efforts at the regional level strengthened the capacity of adolescents and young people on SRHR. ESARO supported youth-led initiatives through funding, mentorship, and the creation of online platforms and mobile health applications by engaging young people in solution building. [See Annex I for an example from Uganda]

### *Innovation*

While the innovation accelerator is explored in greater detail in Finding 1, the RO applied it most directly to its work with adolescents and youth, through the HackLabs engaging young entrepreneurs and through championing use of digital technology in innovations such as using AI to monitor social media for SRHR ‘hotspots’.<sup>33</sup>

### *Addressing structural inequalities, such as discriminatory gender and social norms that hinder the achievement of transformative results*

There are opportunities regarding youth engagement and building champions that are challenging to seize. Despite the many efforts to enable adolescents and youth to access comprehensive sexuality education in and out-of-school, or quality integrated youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and information, many young people cannot or do not access CSE or SRH commodities and care. Adolescents and youth are still facing early and forced marriages, early and unintended pregnancy, HIV infection, drug abuse and gender-based violence (GBV). Maternal mortality remains high among young women. Normative work on youth and children has made advancements but is yet to yield practical dividends translating to improved indicators around the TRs. The CSE programme has been introduced in schools but is facing resistance in some communities. There is resistance to CSE among the traditional, religious leaders and faith-based organisations. Girls in many parts of the region also continue to suffer harmful traditional practices,

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including GBV, FGM and early marriage. Stakeholders uniformly pointed to the need for greater focus on social norms change as a driver of impact for young people. Many conventional SRH programmes have not directly addressed the root cause of the problem, the social norms embedded in different communities. Rather, they have either focused on a medical response or to addressing only the behaviour of young people without addressing the behaviour of those who hold power in their communities. Addressing stigma and cultural norms that may hinder service utilization should be the key strategy in the coming new strategic plan.

While the Regional Office's accelerated focus on adolescents and youth has yielded results, and individual interventions have been impactful, a greater focus on the ecosystem surrounding young people is necessary to move the social norms for progress for young people. This should include continuing the RO's work on accountability frameworks for people in power over youth and addressing emerging issues for young people in the region, including mental health and drug use.

## 3.2 Strategic Shifts

*EQ2: How are the strategic shifts supporting the achievements of the TRs in the ESA region?*

### **Summary:**

The Regional Office has augmented the value of the organizational focus on achieving the three transformative results with strategy and programming that is responsive to the complex realities in the region, including adding ending sexual transmission of HIV as a region-specific result. The Regional Office has recognized and advanced the strategic shifts through collaboration (UN partner relationships and strong flagship programmes) and learning (research and direction on megatrends and the development of a funding-financing strategy for the region). Especially noteworthy is the Regional Office's identification of key existential threats to the region, such as climate change and social norm change. The UNFPA's ability to achieve its goals requires ongoing attention to funding decline and the need for synergy and collaboration between UN agencies with complementary mandates. The Regional Office has positioned itself to strategically advance on these issues, including supporting Country Offices with evidence, technical support and guidance. However, it is unclear that this positioning is moving at the same rapid pace as the issues themselves – in other words, it is unclear that the identification and strategic thought leadership has translated to agile operational response at pace. (Findings 8-13)

**Finding 8: The 3TRs, while galvanizing, are an imperfect fit for the region and present certain regional and localized operational challenges that require agility and leadership from the Regional Office.**

Strategic shift (a) aligning the organizational focus on achieving the three transformative results, set out in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, was adopted by the Regional Office as an implementation strategy for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. As illustrated

above, the RPAP, as an annex of the Strategic Plan contained a considered integration of relevant accelerators, strategic shifts and enablers as a means of achieving the 3TRs.

It was apparent to the Evaluation Team in conversations with regional and country level stakeholders that the 3TRs model (and its former language of ‘Three Zeros’) had a motivating effect. UNFPA partners readily identified that they shared these common priorities and UNFPA personnel indicated that it made advocacy and the development of interventions easier using the 3TRs model.

However, the Strategic Plan construct is an imperfect fit for the region. The Transformative Results as they are set out are not sufficiently nuanced to speak to political interests and social realities in the region. Notably, ending sexual transmission of HIV is a critical reality for the region and a core component of meeting the 3TRs, but is not identified as a Transformative Result. While the Regional Office attempted to overcome the lack of global focus on HIV by creating a region-specific result, it did not have the same marketing effect as the Three Zeros and 3TRs.

There are additional HQ ‘blind spots’ that fall to the Regional Office to address. HQ communications or global statements related to regionally sensitive topics that do not align with the social, legal or political context, including language related to the LGBTQ+ community, language related to family planning and sexual education, and language seen as culturally insensitive, present advocacy and leadership challenges in the region. Country Office interviewees described the Regional Office efforts to overcome challenging messaging or support their in-country advocacy in the face of government disagreement with global UNFPA positioning, such as leadership advocacy at the regional level, and multi-language translation of global statements that adopted regionally appropriate phrasing, which provided to varying degrees of success.

However, perhaps the most significant issue raised about the alignment with the Strategic Plan relates to the UNFPA’s expertise and reputation with respect to population and development. (The work of the Regional Office in this area is explored at finding 5.) A key concern raised across the Evaluation Team interviews was that the 3TRs neglected one of UNFPA’s key calling cards – population and development. In the ESA region, UNFPA has been the go-to agency for supporting census-taking and population data analysis for many years. Indeed, there are very few other expert agencies in the region in this field. UNFPA in the region, at the Regional and Country level has situated itself as a core partner to governments in advancing the collection and analysis of population data. This has been a lever through which the UNFPA has been able to develop evidence and create the ‘proof’ of need for SRHR – a critical advocacy tool and a means of strengthening national abilities and ownership of the problem. However, under the past two strategic plans, UNFPA appears to its stakeholders to have moved away from population and development as a core deliverable. Government partners do not appreciate the cross-cutting nature of population development in the Strategic Plan but rather as a downgrading of this critical function by not including it as a flagship Transformative Result. This was raised as a credibility issue by national government interviewees and as a reduction in the power of a major tool by UNFPA personnel and other UN partners in the countries. As one stakeholder put it, “UNFPA forgot the P in its name.”

There are have real implications for the region. For example, funding across the region diminished for population and development, and government partners viewed this as a direct result of the Strategic Plan language and the shift in focus. UNFPA in the region is less associated with HIV than UNAIDS, creating competition for funds and credibility. These credibility and funding issues fell to the Regional Office, which met the challenges related to HIV and FGM reasonably well, generating persuasive evidence, strategies, and regional leadership on these key topics. However, with respect to population and development, although the Regional Office has a strong reputation and body of work in the region during the period of the RPAP that does not reflect a downgraded perspective, both the RO and COs suffer from the impression of their partners. The UNFPA at all levels would be well-served to find a means of elevating this area in the next Strategic Plan and RPAP.

Although the RPAP Theory of Change was linear in nature, the Regional Office introduced an Adaptive Management approach that was responsive to the complexity of the region and focused on developing the arguments and tools required to make progress, resulting in real time successes. It is clear however that implementation and widespread permutation of the Regional Office's approaches are incomplete. A reconceptualization of the Theory of Change that better reflects the Regional Office's recognition of complexity and a continuation/honing of tailored and targeted approaches that dig deeply into social norms, data generation and analysis, and reaching key target populations is required to realize the foundational gains realized during the period of the RPAP.

**Finding 9: The impacts and opportunities of the megatrends have not yet been fully realized in the region. Recognition and appreciation is there, some work is underway but there is more to explore and augment.**

Strategic shift (b) Integrating the effects of megatrends, such as climate change, demographic shifts, inequalities and digitalization into programming, set out in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, was adopted by the Regional Office as an implementation strategy for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. Demographic diversity, demographic dividend opportunity, and migration and displacement due to climate change and conflicts have emerged as the key demographic megatrends in the ESA region.

The Evaluation Team found that that there is an appreciation at the RO level for the relevant key megatrends in the region and that data on the megatrends is needed for evidence-informed differentiated responses. RO has played the role of an enabler and catalyzer which stimulated the demand for data, analysis and demographic intelligence in the region, across thematic units and Country Offices. For example, climate change impact is a reality across the region. Preparedness on humanitarian, displacement and food insecurity was assessed in all countries except Eritrea in 2022 using population data and MISP assessment, which led to the development of Action Plans and quarterly meetings to assess progress and respond.

There is demographic diversity across the region, requiring the Regional Office to balance its work on the demographic dividend with attention to aging and low fertility for countries in advanced demographic stages. For example, Mauritius has already requested support to develop a National Population Policy with a focus on aging.

Overall, the Regional Office is using data effectively but not realizing the full benefits, especially when it comes to translation of the knowledge, capacities and usage of data on megatrends at the country level. Table 5 below illustrates the efforts made by the Regional Office and remaining capacity gaps related to key megatrends.

Table 5: RO Efforts and Gaps on the use of data on megatrends, prepared by the Evaluation Team

Category	RO Efforts	Capacity Gaps
Demographic Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ DD intelligence and profiles in all countries</li> <li>○ AU DD roadmap</li> <li>○ DD profiles in 8 countries</li> <li>○ NTA analysis for DD profiles and aging profiles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Capacity building</li> <li>○ Broader partnership</li> <li>○ Momentum and engagement</li> <li>○ Moving beyond knowledge creation to programme development on demographic dividend</li> </ul>
Migration and Urbanization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Thematic understanding related to urbanization and climate change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Over reliance on external agencies for migration data obscures thematic understanding</li> </ul>
Support to COs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Guidance notes</li> <li>○ Training</li> <li>○ Cross-regional sharing</li> <li>○ Census</li> <li>○ Humanitarian preparedness assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Insufficient country knowledge to analyze and use census and population data</li> <li>○ Use of data for policy and programme planning</li> </ul>

Sources: RO documents, KIIs with personnel and partners, deep dive at Annex J

The impacts and opportunities of the megatrends have not yet been fully realized in the region. As demonstrated in Table 5, the Regional Office has recognized and appreciated the need for investigation of megatrends and commendable work is being done on several fronts, especially related to traditional data systems and mandate areas. The envelope of work needs to expand to include the new emerging megatrends and augment the knowledge generation and use of data as well as their transfer to the country offices. The work on demographic dividend, migration and aging needs to be strengthened and it should be guided by long-term strategic vision, plan, capacities and partnerships to reinforce UNFPA's position as the lead population and development agency.

For more analysis on the impacts of data on megatrends, please see Annex J.



#### Answering the Deep Dive Questions

*Did the design and operationalization of the RP make effective use of data on mega-trends, including increasing the evidence base during the RP period?*

Yes, the structure of the RP focused on increasing the evidence base, including on national censuses and other statistical gathering and analysis processes.

*Was this data used effectively to advance progress on the 3TRs?*

There is still work to be done to align the data to progress on the TRs and to expand and strengthen work on megatrends.

**Finding 10: The RPAP integrated HIV response into its broader SRHR approach, with some success. However, the scale of the problem requires ongoing concerted and targeted efforts.**

Strategic shift (d) Scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services, as part of universal health coverage and related plans, set out in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, was adopted by the Regional Office as an implementation strategy for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. The actions taken to scale up SRH services can be seen across the RPAP and its results, particularly with respect to Outputs 1 and 2.<sup>34</sup> This finding examines the way in which this strategic shift was applied to the region-specific result, ending sexual transmission of HIV.

With respect to the priority the Regional Office placed on ending sexual transmission of HIV, it applied the same holistic and scaling approach that it brought to the rest of the SRHR portfolio: it prepared a futures paper, developed the evidence base, and, following the globally recognized best practices, began to integrate HIV response into broader SRH and health system interventions.<sup>35</sup> The HIV portfolio was nested in the Regional Office SRHR team, ensuring that linkages between broader SRH programming and HIV response were made.

A strong example of this regional work is the Regional Office leadership on 2gether4SRHR, a joint programme with UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO. These efforts results in increased reduction in infections in the target countries<sup>36</sup>, creating a model available for replication across the region. The Regional Office has been a trusted partner with other UN agencies and international organizations working on HIV reduction in the region, specifically relied upon for its evidence-based approaches and leadership capacity.<sup>37</sup>

Key components of ESARO's comprehensive and integrated HIV programming in the region are set out in Table 6. The elements of this programming, like the elements of the broader SRH programming apply a number of the accelerators and strategic shifts, including human-rights and gender transformative approaches, humanitarian and resilience building, a focus on LNOB, and the use of population data as evidence.

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<sup>34</sup> The results are available in the Regional Office Annual Reports, and were corroborated by programme documents and interviews. They notably include upskilling midwives to provide a broader range of maternal/SRH care, advancing the timely procurement and delivery of SRH commodities, and the creation of new opportunities for women and girls to reach service providers, such as youth-friendly spaces, the use of motorcycle ambulances, and the creation of One-Stop centres capable of responding to SRH health care needs and GBV issues in the same space.

<sup>35</sup> UNFPA. (2023). The roadmap to zero HIV transmission in the ESA Region by 2030: Every HIV infection averted counts. July 2023 (draft refreshed)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> UN partner agency interviews

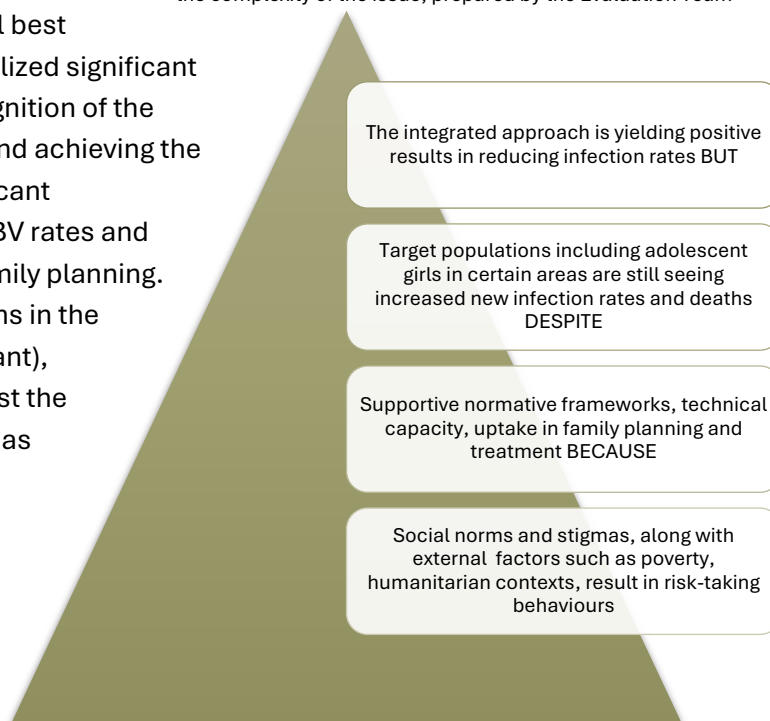
Table 6: Components of ESARO’s HIV programming, prepared by the Evaluation Team

Category	RO Activities
Education	Awareness Campaigns Sexual Health Education Training and Capacity Building
Condom Supply	Distribution Programs Promotion of Condom Use
Testing	Access to Testing Routine Testing Confidentiality and Counselling
SRH Services	Comprehensive Care Youth-friendly Services
Humanitarian Response	Condoms in the MISP Mobile Health Units Testing and Treatment Commodities and Capacities
Population Identification	Use of data and evidence to assess vulnerable target groups

Sources: RO documents, including Annual Reports and the The roadmap to zero HIV transmission in the ESA Region by 2030: Every HIV infection averted counts. July 2023

The ESARO integrated approach— nesting HIV inside the larger work of the SRHR strategy - is a global best practice adopted by the UNFPA and has realized significant success. In the region, there is further recognition of the interdependencies between reducing HIV and achieving the 3TRs. HIV infections in the region are significant components of maternal mortality rates, GBV rates and are deeply interrelated with the usage of family planning. As a result, without addressing HIV infections in the region (which remain quantitatively significant), meaningful progress cannot be made against the 3TRs, as illustrated in Figure 9. Fortunately, as rates of infection have lowered, so have maternal mortality rates. GBV rates remain frustratingly high, as they do globally. Likewise, there are some populations, notably young people, for whom current efforts to provide supports, services and normative frameworks are unsuccessful. The common barrier to success across the 3TRs is social norms, which, in turn are influenced by externalities such as poverty, the humanitarian context, etc.<sup>38</sup>

Figure 9: The integrated response does not entirely respond to the complexity of the issue, prepared by the Evaluation Team



Source: An Analysis of the Linkages between HIV/AIDs and UNFPA’s Three Transformative Results, L. Gelmon, January 31, 2024

<sup>38</sup> An Analysis of the Linkages between HIV/AIDs and UNFPA’s Three Transformative Results, L. Gelmon, January 31, 2024.


HIV in humanitarian settings is an area of strength for the Regional Office and its support to Country Offices. HIV supports in Ethiopia, Mozambique and South Sudan were comprehensive across the emergency response, including through the integration of HIV services (testing, counselling and treatment) into health services, through the provision of family planning, STI treatment and maternal health services, through women-friendly and youth-friendly spaces, through education and awareness campaigns, through integrating HIV services into GBV responses and through training healthcare providers on treatment protocols.

Targeting the furthest behind and those groups, such as young people, who are not sufficiently reached by the current work must be the next area of focus for the Regional Office and its partners. There are emerging concerns for the efforts of the Regional Office. The overall reduction in donor funding for health care may have negative implications for HIV reduction. Interviewees noted that new infection rates are beginning to increase in 20-30 year olds in some countries. Ongoing anti-rights issues may also plague HIV reduction including age of consent to accessing commodities and treatment, backlash against the LGBTQ community.

For more analysis on the Regional Office's approach to ending sexual transmission of HIV, see Annex J.

#### Answering the Deep Dive Questions

*How does the RP effectively advance this regional priority?*

 The RP has effectively advanced the priority through its holistic approach (evidence, strategy, technical support, etc), and through leadership on key joint programmes such as 2gether4SRHR. These efforts have resulted in meaningful reduction in infection rates and deaths. However, the scale of the problem requires continued, concerted effort.

*Is this regional priority meaningfully balanced with and integrated with the global SP approach?*

Yes and no. UNFPA globally has been an active leader on HIV reduction, as co-lead on the Global Prevention Coalition, and through integration of HIV response with broader SRHR interventions. The Regional Office has successfully used that model. Given the Region's position as the global epicentre of HIV, the Regional Office needs to continue its prioritization of HIV as a regional result. Without this level of high prioritization, the TRs, along with the SDGs and other continental and regional aspirations will not be achieved.

**Finding 11: The Regional Office's focus on building a toolkit for the future and its differentiated country approach provided useful guidance to Country Offices. However, more implementation support is required.**

Strategic shift (h) Tailoring programmatic and technical assistance to better respond to local contexts through a country office-led process, set out in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, was adopted by the Regional Office as an implementation strategy for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025.



The foundational work conducted by the Regional Office team under this Programme plan reflected the complexity of the contexts in the region. While the linear nature of the Change Story (see above at Figure 5) does not fully capture the complexity and fluidity of the region’s multiple contexts, the application of the Change Story by the Regional Office was nuanced by the RO’s adoption of the UNFPA’s adaptive management framework<sup>39</sup>, and in particular the goals of fostering strategic foresight, persuasion and inclusive leadership.<sup>40</sup>

The common pathways resulted in what the Evaluation Team noted as a holistic approach that the Regional Office brings to advancing the TRs - an approach that provides “wrap-around support” to Country Offices, from the generation of thought leadership and evidence, to technical support and quality assurance. The Technical Assistance Strategy developed by the Regional Office provides the routes for Country Offices to seek support, contextualize direction from UNFPA HQ, identify and analyze regional issues, and bolster in-country advocacy, and realize critical successes. Country Office personnel confirmed their active use of these routes for support. They noted the value of evidentiary tools, assessments, and guidance notes, as well as the key support of regional joint programmes. However, they indicated that the overall volume of the content had not yet been absorbed at the Country Office level, due to capacity gaps, country priorities and timing. This was corroborated in Regional Office interviews.

Table 7 below illustrates the Regional Office’s work supporting Country Offices in alignment with its adaptive leadership goals and A-Compass drivers.

Table 7: Regional Office Supports to Country Offices aligned to Adaptive Leadership Goals and A-Compass Drivers, prepared by Evaluation Team,

Regional Office Supports to Country Offices (with examples)	Adaptive Leadership Goals	A-Compass Drivers
Thought Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Futures papers</li> <li>○ Thematic and operational strategies</li> <li>○ Support to COs in development of CPDs</li> </ul>	Strategic Foresight	Learning, Leadership
Regional and Joint Programmes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Spotlight Initiative</li> <li>○ 2gether4SRHR</li> <li>○ Safeguard Young People</li> </ul>	Persuasion, Inclusive Leadership	Collaboration, Leadership
Evidence Generation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Demographic Dividend</li> <li>○ Geo-referencing data related to LNOB</li> </ul>	Persuasion	Learning
Country-specific Thematic Assessments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ MISP Readiness Assessment</li> <li>○ Resource Mobilization and Partnership Mapping</li> </ul>	Strategic Foresight, Persuasion, Inclusive Leadership	Agility, Leadership
Regional and Country Advocacy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Draft laws and policy frameworks on GBV, FGM at regional and country level</li> </ul>	Persuasion	Collaboration, Leadership

<sup>39</sup> The A-Compass, UNFPA Adaptive Management Model <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA%20-%20Adaptive%20Management%20Framework.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> A World of Zeros, UNFPA ESARO 2023 Annual Report, slide 23

○ Budgetary policies at regional level		
Financing and Resources	Persuasion, Strategic Foresight	Leadership
○ Guidance notes		
○ Intelligence gathering		

Source RPAP, RO documents, RO Annual Report 2023, UNFPA Adaptive Management Framework

The Regional Office has further nuanced the provision of Country Office support through a tailored or differentiated approach that considers the operational challenges and thematic contextual realities of the countries, as well as their economic classification (for example, middle income countries). This approach is designed to make best use of Regional Office expertise, recognizing the variety of contexts that exist across the region. This tailored approach was applied to the RO’s approach to resource mobilization. The RO categorizes Country Offices based on their context and ability to mobilize funds (Category 1: MICs where resources are hard to mobilize, Category 2: resource mobilization is conducive but not yet fully meeting the target, Category 3: conducive and meeting or surpassing targets), and provides thought leadership, evidence and technical support accordingly.<sup>41</sup>

The overall tailored approach across operational and thematic areas was met with largely positive reviews from Regional and Country Office interviewees. However, while MICs are supported by a dedicated MIC Hub, there is a gap between CO need and RO capacity to respond. While the MIC Hub is intended to act as an intermediary between thematic teams and MIC COs in order to ensure guidance is tailored, this creates a dependency and the need for cross-office collaboration. The MIC Hub team itself is small and does not cover all technical areas of expertise on its own. This capacity gap was noted both by MIC Country Office personnel and RO personnel. Countries suddenly classified as middle income found themselves without funding in critical health care and without the national structures or budgets in place to respond. UNFPA offices in middle income countries shrank. While the Regional Office attempted to respond with the MIC Hub, this remains a credibility issue and an implementation challenge for country governments and UNFPA. The MIC Hub model has the potential to be responsive. It is still relatively new and will require ongoing review to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the MICs in a timely and effective manner. Conversely, countries that are high performers indicated that they experience a light touch from the Regional Office and, indeed, were called upon to give (rather than receive) staff and expertise to Regional Office interventions.

The combination of the adaptive leadership goals and the tailored approach contribute meaningfully to the future-focused work produced by the Regional Office during the RPAP period, work that has the potential to increase the agility of the region to respond to complex and fluid challenges. Country Offices have been differently and increasingly enabled by strategy, thought leadership and evidence. This is a critical foundation. However, it is all relatively new and will require ongoing strengthening and maturing to fully realize the potential at the country level across the region.

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<sup>41</sup> RO Resource Mobilization Strategy

Finding 12: The financing capacity developed at the Regional Office has not yet matured sufficiently to meet existing and future need.

Strategic shift (j) Shifting the focus from funding the ICPD agenda to financing the ICPD agenda, set out in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, was adopted by the Regional Office as an implementation strategy for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025.

The need for a shift from funding to financing is not theoretical in ESAR - it is a current reality. As global attention shifts to humanitarian crises in other regions and the political tolerance for UNFPA's mandate topics wanes with the increase in conservatism, ODA is rapidly diminishing and/or being awarded to other development players. This concern was expressed to the Evaluation Team by personnel and partners across the region, not as a potential future issue but as a current challenge that has already had significant impacts on UNFPA's ability to support programming and achieve impact. This gap is in clear conflict with the need to accelerate impact and presents an existential concern for UNFPA in the region.

It is evident that the Regional Office has understood and prioritized resource mobilization and the shift to innovative financing as the existential crises that it is. Despite a lack of guidance from the global HQ on the application of financing as an accelerator, the Regional Office has invested effort in enhancing internal capacity and creating the body of thought leadership and evidence required to make the funding-financing shift and make it regionally meaningful.

The Regional Programme contains a specific and targeted commitment to shifting the resource mobilization model: *The region will accelerate strategic actions to mobilize resources to achieve the transformative results, including i) diversifying the resource base to raise at least \$400 million from non-core resources for both country and regional programmes; ii) securing at least 5 percent of the non-core resource target through innovative financing and non-traditional donors; iii) strengthening value proposition for regional humanitarian response; iv) mobilizing increased annual core contributions from at least 16 countries in the region; and v) sustaining internal capacity building and donor intelligence to Country Offices.* Regional Office personnel reported positive progress and/or complete achievement against each of these targets, including surpassing the 2023 fundraising target by \$40.6M.<sup>42</sup>

The Evaluation Team assessed the Regional Office's contribution to the development of this accelerator as strategic and evidence-based. Work at the Regional Office to drive a shift to financing falls into a number of categories, set out at Table 8.

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<sup>42</sup> A World of Zeros UNFPA ESARO 2023 Annual Report p21

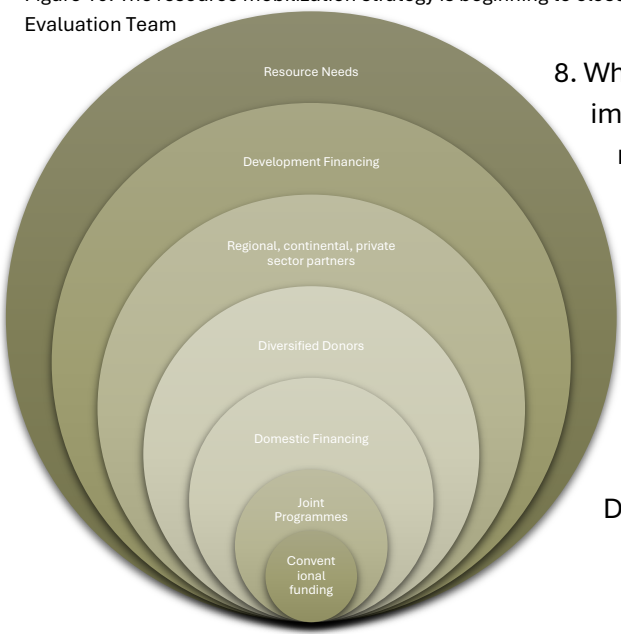
Table 8: Regional Office Contribution to Strategic Resource Mobilization

Developing Thought Leadership	Creating the Body of Evidence	Building Internal and External Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative financing in ESAR presentation</li> <li>• ESARO RMP Strategy</li> <li>• Country Programme Document development</li> <li>• Donor and partners communications</li> <li>• IFI Engagement</li> <li>• Joint programme leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Country-specific IF4D Landscape Analysis (Country Context, Health Systems Diagnosis, Financial Gaps)</li> <li>• Political Economy Analysis for SADC and EAC</li> <li>• Donor perspectives newsletter</li> <li>• Country categorization and contextualisation</li> <li>• Investment Cases</li> <li>• Financial Gap and National Budget Analyses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solutions Toolbox</li> <li>• Strategy Toolkit and Training Modules</li> <li>• Partnership Identification and Assessment</li> <li>• Support to AU, SADC, EAC including embedded resources</li> <li>• CPD and target development support to COs</li> <li>• CO and country cluster training and regular meetings</li> <li>• Support for proposal development</li> <li>• Roundtable issue discussions</li> </ul>

Source: Resource Mobilization Strategy, personnel interviews

These impressive efforts are beginning to yield on-the-ground success at the regional and country levels. At the regional level, SRH is now on the health budget agenda at the African Union and the regional economic fora. Domestic financing is advancing across the region in key portfolios such as the Compact for Family Planning in place in 12 countries. [See Annex I for an example of the Compact for Family Planning in Zimbabwe.] There are 20 private sector financing programs in development by the Regional and Country Offices. Innovative development impact bonds have been introduced in Kenya, and are in the inception phase in Malawi and Zambia. The public-private partnership program in Rwanda on universal health care and primary health care is maturing and there are interesting commercial partnerships such as Drones for Health in Botswana. The Regional Office is also supporting the attraction of new donors, such as Korea and Japan, and dialogues with long-term donors about new financing models.

Figure 10: The resource mobilization strategy is beginning to close the gap, prepared by the Evaluation Team



However, these results have not yet kept pace with the need, as illustrated in Figure 8. While the strategy is sound, it is longer-term and the need is immediate. The Evaluation Team observed that there is urgent need for a whole-of-the-region response to the upcoming funding gap, including greater skillsets and understanding to be translated from the Regional Office Resource Mobilization team through the RO and into the COs. This capacity building should include strategic ways to have conversations with partners about concerns, opportunities and their potential roles in new models of resource mobilization.

For more analysis on the funding-financing accelerator, see Deep Dives at Annex J.

Source: Resource Mobilization Strategy, personnel interviews

**Answering the Deep Dive Questions**

*Has the ESARO effectively supported Country Offices in shifting their resource and engagement models to align with the global SP?*

Yes, this work is in progress, with tools, evidence, communications and training available for Country Offices, including the alignment of CPDs to the global SP.

*Has this shift meaningfully taken place?*

It is underway. While foundational pieces are in place at the Regional Office and some successes are starting at the Country Office level, there is still a significant gap in resource need that is not yet filled by aligning to the global SP model.

**Finding 13: UNFPA’s positive reputation in the UN system across the region supports accountability in the mandate areas but requires continuous effort and positioning.**

Strategic shift (I) Increasing the focus on joint accountability, in line with United Nations reforms, principles and practices, set out in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, was adopted by the Regional Office as an implementation strategy for the Regional Programme Action Plan (RPAP) 2022-2025. It should be noted that positive collaboration with UN agencies to advance accountability in the mandate areas is not a new strategy for ESARO in this RPAP. It has been present in Technical Working Groups and as a partner in joint programmes and initiatives prior to the RPAP.

Known across the region for being an excellent collaborator, UNFPA has forged strong partnerships out of necessity. UN partners at the regional and country level noted that the UNFPA has been a leader in advancing the elements of its mandate – particularly, SRHR and population and development - allowing the agency to “punch above its weight” (in the words of one Resident Coordinator). Stakeholders confirmed that ESARO’s strategic relationship building ability and guidance to Country Offices has resulted in its positive standing with other UN agencies, governments, NGOs, and community stakeholders. In many countries, UNFPA leads key joint initiatives, leveraging its expertise and network to drive significant progress in crucial areas. As a part of the Spotlight Initiative, UNFPA's leadership in the African Regional Programme, including housing the Programme Coordination Unit (PCU), has necessitated significant intergovernmental engagement. This involvement has not only enhanced the programme’s effectiveness but also significantly increased the visibility and influence of UNFPA in the region.

UNFPA's regional flagship joint programmes, towards which ESARO has dedicated significant non-core resources, time and personnel, have achieved major successes, exemplified by initiatives such as Safeguard Young People, Together for SRHR, and the Spotlight Initiative. These programmes have made substantial impacts by addressing sexual and reproductive health, rights, and gender-based violence. UNFPA's collaborative approach extends to working with other agencies, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to bundle issues and create comprehensive, multi-faceted responses to complex challenges. The Joint UNICEF/UNFPA Programme on ending FGM is currently on its fourth cycle a confirmation that the collaborative spirit that is delivering results is evident.

ESARO and the Country Offices in the region were noted by UN partners for their collaborative leadership at technical working groups and at UNCT. UNFPA is a presence and frequently a leader at population, health and gender working groups, as well as holding a place at humanitarian and operational tables. The results of this effort are evident – other UN agencies were all well able to articulate the mandate of UNFPA and identify the TR goals and outcomes.

As noted above, however, this is not without challenge. Other than population and development which UNFPA holds largely alone, the rest of the UNFPA mandate is shared by other UN agencies (UNICEF, UN Women, UNDP, UNHCR, WHO, IOM, etc.). UN Reform continues to push agencies closer together, collapsing traditional ‘jurisdictional’ lines between agencies and encouraging more joint programming. Traditional donors are also increasingly demanding joint programming. UN personnel (both inside and outside UNFPA) indicated the challenges this can present for the mid-sized and smaller UN agencies, such as UNFPA, as they seek to compete for leadership and funding against the large agencies. This competition also comes from other small and mid-sized agencies competing for the same thing. Personnel and UN partners highlighted overlaps within programmatic interventions and implementing partners engagement, particularly in the Spotlight Initiative, which could cause tension or lack of efficiency in joint programmes. In a landscape marked by intense competition for the same beneficiaries, addressing overlapping issues and constrained financial resources is imperative.

In the face of established agencies, UNFPA must rely on its flexibility to find its niche inside the UN family. Regional leadership at technical working tables, task forces, OIBCs, and in regional joint programmes was credited with continuing to support UNFPA’s raison d’être on key issues and with being the agency tapped by Resident Coordinators to lead country-level joint programming. [See Annex I for an example of UNCT leadership from Kenya.]

There is an opportunity to use the strong evidentiary skillset and tools that the Regional Office has built through its focus on data to advantage. This capability supports not only UNFPA’s own objectives of furthering UN accountability on its mandate but also meets the data needs of other UN agencies and stakeholders. By capitalizing on this data advantage, UNFPA can continue to enhance its influence and effectiveness, offering a distinct value proposition in a sector characterized by intense competition and similar funding challenges.

Further, ESARO’s successes with large scale flagship programmes have demonstrated that there is a path to ensuring that the UNFPA’s SRHR mandate can be well positioned in the UN reform agenda through establishing synergies and collaboration across the agencies.

### 3.3 Enablers

*EQ3: To what extent have the enablers facilitated the implementation of the accelerators and strategic shifts within the region?*

**Summary:**

The SPE Inception Report identified a number of enablers (cross-cutting coordination, strategic communication, resource mobilization, knowledge management, business operations and M&E) to operationalize the strategic shifts and accelerators. These enablers are not new to the Regional Office and have been in place for a period prior to the RPAP. A summary of Regional Office efforts on the enablers is at Table 9.

Table 9: Regional Office Process Strengths, prepared by the Evaluation Team

Regional Office Process Strengths and Enablers	Regional Office Contributions to the Strengths
CPD development and implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future papers and pre-CPD workshops and knowledge development</li> <li>• Guidance on the application of the Strategic Plan elements</li> <li>• Ensuring alignment to key commitments including ICPD, SDGs, continental priorities</li> <li>• Measurement and reporting support and guidance</li> </ul>

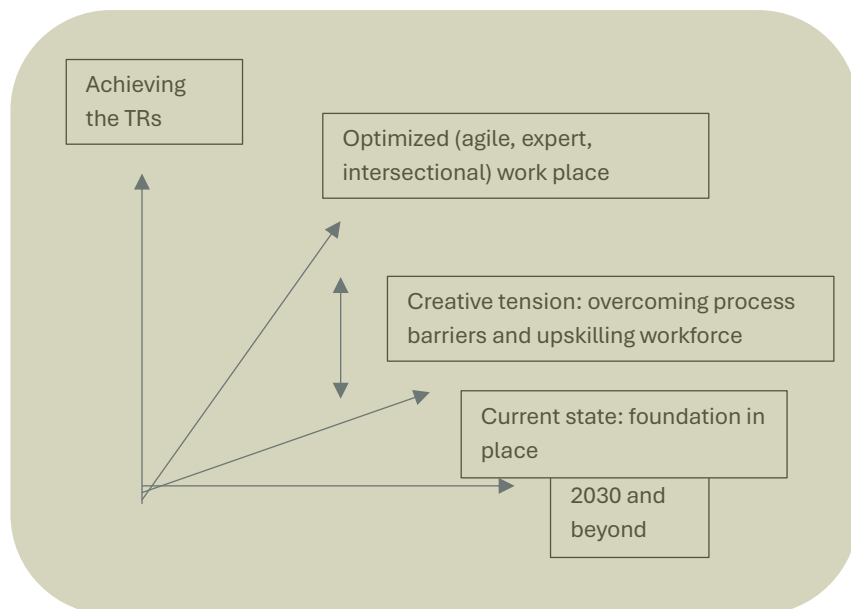
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deep dive analyses and 3-programme cycle reflection sessions</li> </ul>
Cross-cutting Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking humanitarian and SRH portfolios, SRH and GEWE portfolios, integration focus</li> <li>• Ensuring key regional priorities on HIV and FGM are prioritized during the application of the global plan</li> <li>• Engaging in critical relationship building with regional economic forums and South-South cooperation</li> </ul>
Knowledge Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Toolkits and guidance notes on emerging issues and global expectations</li> <li>• Regional and sub-regional sharing opportunities</li> </ul>
M&E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance notes and hands-on technical support for reporting</li> <li>• Regular evaluations at programmatic and thematic levels</li> <li>• Regional Programme logframe and RBM structure</li> </ul>
Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance notes and hands-on technical support for reporting, budgeting, procurement, accountability</li> <li>• Adapting the HQ expectations on oversight, accountability, risk management, and tools (IT, reporting) to match the complexities of the region</li> </ul>

Source: RO documents and personnel interviews

The Regional Office has adopted an adaptive management approach that has prioritized agility and learning in the workforce and processes. There is a valuable appreciation of the complexity of the region and the value of strategic foresight and futures approaches. It has prioritized critical futures-based and intersectional approaches and skillsets. However, as illustrated by Figure 11, there are elements of the workforce structure and operational processes that have not yet fully enabled realization of the desired approach and outcomes. There is a need to ensure that personnel are trained on critical strategic and cross-cutting skillsets including those on resource mobilization, resilience and preparedness, and innovation. (Finding 14 and 15)



Figure 9: The creative tension between ambition and current workplace realities, prepared by the Evaluation Team



Source: RO documents and personnel interviews

**Finding 14: The business operations of the Regional Office are a strong engine but there are organizational barriers to supporting acceleration.**

The Operations team at the Regional Office provides hands-on technical support to Country Offices, provides UN support at working groups, and supports risk management for the region – all in critical areas including procurement, contracting, IT and reporting. The Operations team has played a leading role in UN reforms, in terms of developing a working relationship with the common back office situated in Nairobi.

However, there are some functional barriers to success created at the global level that the Regional Office has not yet overcome. Regional Office personnel noted that the Strategic Plan OEE2 Optimize management of resources is very brief and does not come with a clear definition, guidance or results framework, which does not reflect the entirety of work done at the Regional Office level. This has implications in terms of the ability of the Operations team to meaningfully report on their work or highlight results.

The agency's move to the Quantum system created delays and frustrations as a number of the internal processes needed to make Quantum successful remained manual. The Quantum tool has the potential to be an enabler but this potential is not fully realized.

The agency's procurement model presents significant challenges to implementing programming in a nimble fashion. Specifically, the procurement model does not easily allow for contracting with

small organizations or individual entrepreneurs. These kinds of potential partners are relegated either to teaming with a larger implementing partner (which reduces the voice that small partners have directly with the UNFPA) or to engaging only in relationships where they win prize money, such as through participation in hackathons. This approach reduces entrepreneurs and small organizations to one-time recipients of funding and reduces, if not eliminates, the deeper opportunity for the region and countries to benefit from the ongoing insight and tools created by innovators. These practical and reputational risks were noted in the HackLabs Evaluation Final Report June 2024 (p32) and at p59 :*“Although a clever workaround to the bureaucracy of UNFPA fund disbursement, and a way to ensure that innovators could receive funds without having registered businesses as was the case for some of them, this process created friction between the parties and put a burden on the innovators to upfront funds from their own to achieve the milestones in order to receive the funding.”* This is not a Regional Office construct, it is a global policy which is understandably attempting to manage risk. However, it is anathema to innovation, flexibility and the introduction of young voices and new partners.

Similarly, the global policy that limits the length of contracts creates instability and a reduced delivery window in mandate areas that should be geared towards long-term gains. This is especially challenging when combined with a lack of timely payment. The Regional Office and Country Offices across the region struggle with timely payment to partners. The Evaluation Team heard repeatedly from regional partners and funding recipients across the region that payment was delayed for months on a regular basis. Partners described up to 8 months delay between the signing of project agreements and the delivery of funding.

This has had very real consequences across the region, including lengthy stoppages in critical service delivery, publicized programs failing to launch or launch in a reduced capacity as partners struggle to meet the program commitments in 4 months rather than in 10-11 months, and has created reputational damage for UNFPA across the region. One partner indicated that they relegate UNFPA programming to more minor aspects of their work, where the damage from late payment is less significant. This sentiment was not uncommon and should not be minimized as a minor hassle for partners.

#### The Experience of Regional Partners and Payment Delays

*“Delay in disbursement means we have to compromise on quantity and quality of services to meet the shortened timeline.”*

*“The funds from UNFPA took too long so we approached our other funder and UNFPA was given another lane where the timing was less critical...and they still haven’t paid”*

*“I was setting milestones in the community based on the UNFPA commitments but the funding didn’t come for 6-7 months, which hurt our reputation and the UNFPA’s”*

**Finding 15: There is opportunity to augment the dedication and expertise of personnel with increased workforce capacity.**

There should be no doubt that the personnel at the Regional Office are dedicated, skilled and respected by stakeholders as advocates for beneficiaries and UNFPA representatives. The Evaluation Team was impressed by their strategic approach to problem solving and by their evident care for the wellbeing of the people of the region and interviews with CO personnel and regional stakeholders confirmed this impression.

The Regional Office structure was evolved to align with the Output areas of the RPAP, creating thematic and operational groups and augmenting with tailored expertise in humanitarian, innovation, MICs, etc. This model allows for cross-coordination and synergies within programming and futures thinking. Interviews with RO personnel indicated that these clusters allowed for both broad horizontal dialogues on key topics as well as deep dives and strategy development in particular areas and they indicated a high degree of coordination between thematic and operational groups, which was corroborated by intersectional thought leadership papers. The Regional Office organizational chart is attached at Annex L.

There are some structural and capacity issues with respect to the workforce in the region that present barriers to ensuring that personnel are able to work in an integrated fashion to maximize the Strategic Plan approaches and accelerate progress. In other words, the Regional Office has not articulated an internal structural alignment to fully operationalize the response to the complex needs of the region. There are structural silos across a number of different layers of the organization, from global structure, to the HDP nexus, to the thematic areas, to the application of the Strategic Plan elements such as innovation.

The global structure presents some real implications for effective working in the region. As noted in other sections, there is a disconnect between guidance prepared at the HQ and the needs/realities of the region - but there is also a confusing set of relationships that CO's must navigate between HQ's guiding arms, the Regional Office and other specialty branches of UNFPA. For example, the global humanitarian division has a GBV expert located in the Kenya Country Office and is present in certain key countries in the region. The Regional Office plays the role of interlocutor between this division, its own efforts and the work in the countries. Global projects such as Spotlight have multiple reporting and instruction layers. Each of these layers come with their own Theory of Change, interpretation of HQ Strategic Plan elements, and best practice approaches. Each of them does their own reporting. While these specialty approaches are surely useful, they do create the perception of a lack of cohesion across the region. It is noted that significant components of the UNFPA HQ will be moving to Nairobi in the next few years, presenting an opportunity to reconcile the workflows.

At the regional level, some elements of the organizational structure are not yet fully responsive to the Strategic Plan and Regional Programme goals. There are some key portfolios that require increased capacity:

- the concept of innovation has not been meaningfully integrated across the thematic or operational units but rather sits as a stand alone, two-person silo
- the humanitarian portfolio, while more integrated across the thematic areas and especially with the SRH team, rests with a two person team
- the P&D team conducts core business with a limited team
- the MIC Hub team requires greater capacity to meet the demands of the MICs

These under-resourced and siloed areas inhibit the Region’s response. In some circumstances, while the Regional Office has more successfully integrated some Strategic Plan elements across thematic teams, such as resource mobilization and humanitarian/resilience planning, this integration has not fully made it to Country Office staffing models. It was apparent to the Evaluation Team that Country Office staffing models remain thematically focused and that there is more work required from the Regional Office to move the Country Office mindsets more in line with integration and the future-focused skillset. The current model means that there is limited Country Office staff ownership in innovation, resource mobilization, and, other than in crisis locations, humanitarian/resilience planning. These areas do not appear to be considered cross-cutting or a shared responsibility.

This is a critical gap, given the context of the region and the increasingly fluid reality of climate-based or conflict-created crises that now impact almost every country in the region at some point in the year. Staffing in Country Offices that have not experienced significant humanitarian crises are development focused without training or experience in resilience planning or crisis response. There are promising integrated skills models in some countries, such as Madagascar, where, as a result of RO engagement, staff regularly build resilience and response across the nexus based on the cyclone season. The MTR notes that ESARO has “increased HR recruitment and capacity development of staff across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus” (p15) but this was not observed by the Evaluation Team as fully realized across the region.

At the country level, the reclassification of countries resulted in some less than optimal staffing models in MIC Country Offices, including for example the combining of positions in Namibia such that the same person who is responsible for a critical delivery arm, Population and Development, is also the M&E person for the office. In that same office, there are no longer resource mobilization nor operations manager positions. These gaps do not match the strategic priorities identified for MIC countries, particularly related to resource mobilization and these gaps are not fully addressed by the MIC Hub at the Regional Office.

While it is acknowledged that staffing in Country Offices is not a Regional Office responsibility, the finding above reflects the Evaluation Team’s observation that Regional Office ambitions and goals for the region cannot be achieved if Country Office personnel are not adequately upskilled in line with the Adaptive Management, futures thinking and integrated programming approaches that the Regional Office is developing. The Evaluation Team was not provided with a Human Resources strategy nor a training plan that would support a move to a greater alignment with the ambitions of the Regional Programme and the needs of the region. The thematic and operational expert staff in

the region will need training on and opportunity to apply the cross-cutting skills and futures thinking required going forward. The Regional Office structure will need to ensure it is able to meet its key priorities, including data and evidence.

## 4. Conclusions

This section contains the Evaluation Team's conclusions, flowing from the analysis and findings set out above. The conclusions are responsive to the specific objectives of the evaluation as set out above in Figure 2.

Overall, the Evaluation Team concludes that the Regional Office developed and implemented a Regional Programme that was strategically designed to advance progress towards the TRs, to respond to the complex contexts in the region and to provide evidence, thought leadership, advocacy and technical support to Country Offices, UN colleagues, and partners and stakeholders. This work has created a foundation for progress that aligns to key adaptive management drivers (agility, learning, collaboration, and leadership).<sup>43</sup> However, there is still work to be done to ensure internal capacity and external partnerships are fully able to implement the strategic approaches.

### **CONCLUSION 1: ESARO'S SUPPORT TO COUNTRY OFFICES ALIGNS TO ITS SHIFT TOWARDS AN ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACH AND RECOGNITION OF INCREASING COMPLEXITY IN THE REGION.**

The Regional Office's provision of technical assistance to Country Offices was tailored to country contexts and holistic across thematic and operational areas and work product types, and directly contributed to the achievement of the RPAP outputs and outcomes at country levels. Throughout the period of the RPAP, the RO adopted an adaptive management approach that targeted futures thinking, assessment tools, and evidence generation, which broadened the impact of the RPAP work from immediate to longer-term, preparing the region and Country Offices for ongoing fluidity and complex challenges. Highlights include humanitarian and preparedness responses, commodities/supply chain management, integration of HIV in SRHR. It was evident that in both thematic and operational ways, these approaches are still fresh and Country Offices are not yet sufficiently supported or capacitated to completely realize their potential. (Findings 5, 10, 11)

### **CONCLUSION 2: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT WAS STRATEGICALLY STRENGTHENED DURING THE PERIOD OF THE RPAP AND STAKEHOLDERS WERE ENGAGED IN THE REGIONAL OFFICE'S APPROACH.**

It was evident that the Regional Office is a valued partner for key stakeholders and it approached these relationships in a strategic manner during the period of the RPAP, including through the development of a partnership strategy and in thematic interventions. Highlights of partner engagement include strengthened relationships with regional economic communities and the African Union, and cross-cutting engagement with young people in advocacy, innovation and ideation. The Regional Office has recognized that partner diversification is critical for acceleration and identified areas for improvement. Improving diversification will be dependent on ensuring that

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

ESARO itself is sufficiently capacitated and its offering can be nuanced to meet the interests of new partners. (Findings 2, 7,15)

**CONCLUSION 3: ESARO’S STRUCTURAL CAPACITY IS TAXED BY THE DEMANDS OF THE RPAP.**

There is no doubt about the expertise and capacity of ESARO’s personnel, which is evident in the successful move to a more futures-focused and adaptive construct. However, there are staffing gaps and opportunities to restructure, given the complexity and needs of the region. The institutional arrangements struggle with bureaucratic systems that are barriers to agile responses and, in some cases, operational credibility and programmatic success. While the RPAP outputs have been achieved or are on track, these challenges may hinder acceleration. Decreased resource mobilization is an existential threat to the RO. (Findings 12, 14, 15)

**CONCLUSION 4: ESARO’S CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBAL AND REGIONAL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IS IMPACTFUL.**

ESARO has generated an impactful body of strategy, evidence and thought leadership across all TRs, as well as in the critical field of population and development. It has developed critical knowledge pieces on the megatrends impacting the region. This work has allowed the RO to be persuasive about its mandate. The RO has demonstrated specific leadership in ending sexual transmission of HIV, regional normative frameworks on ending GBV and harmful practices and in data analysis. This thematic leadership is augmented by operational strategies such as resource mobilization and partnership and cross-cutting strategies such as Leave No One Behind. (Findings 3, 4, 6, 9,10)

**CONCLUSION 5: ESARO HAS BEEN AN ACTIVE CONTRIBUTOR AND LEADER IN THE UN SYSTEM AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL, TO POSITIVE EFFECT. MAINTAINING THIS POSITION REQUIRES ONGOING ATTENTION.**

ESARO has demonstrated leadership in the regional UN system, through its roles in key technical tables and working groups, as well as through its leadership of significant joint programmes such as 2gether4SRHR, Spotlight and Safeguard Young People. During the RPAP period, it expanded this position, engaging more actively with other UN agencies, such as IOM on migration and UNHCR, WHO and others related to humanitarian. In this way, ESARO has introduced its mandate into the most critical contexts facing the region. However, the operationalization of the UNFPA’s complementary mandate with other UN agencies combined with increased competition for reducing donor funds means that ESARO will need to continue to assert its relevance and rationale for leadership at the UN regional table. (Findings 12, 13)

**CONCLUSION 6: ESARO’S MOVE TO ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP HAS CREATED THE FOUNDATION FOR THE NEXT RPAP, WHICH SHOULD SEEK TO ENTRENCH THE STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO THE COMPLEXITY OF THE REGION. THIS REQUIRES REINFORCING THROUGH THE NEXT STRATEGIC PLAN.**

Over the course of the RPAP, ESARO has shifted to adaptive leadership, putting in place a series of building blocks that have generated new evidence, strategies, tools and relationships that recognize and respond to the variety of complex and fluid contexts in the region. The strategic

foresight approach already in place is identifying upcoming trends. The RO has begun to learn the lessons of needing the institutional capacity at the regional and country levels to catch up to new approaches, and of integrating cross-cutting capacities in areas like preparedness planning and innovation. It will be critical to solidify institutional capacities and continue to diversify resource mobilization options and strategic partnerships in order to capitalize on the momentum generated in this period. Thematically, increased focus on data and evidence, social norms and targeted responses is required to accelerate progress for those who remain left behind. The Strategic Plan approach was not fully responsive to the needs of the region, particularly with respect to the positioning on data and evidence and HIV. (Finding 1, 5, 8, 12)

## 5. Recommendations

This section provides recommendations that are targeted at the conceptualization and implementation of the next Regional Programme and the next UNFPA Strategic Plan (both 2026-2029). Each recommendation is tied to corresponding findings and conclusions and identifies suggested action items that are for consideration only and the target recipients of the recommendation. As all of the recommendations are intended for inclusion in the upcoming development of the next Regional Programme Action Plan in the fall 2024, differentiated timelines and priority levels are not given. All of the recommendations are based on the overall conclusion that the Regional Office, through the RPAP, has built a foundation of strategic approach, evidence, thought leadership and tools that require entrenching and advancing in order to fully realize acceleration and scale. The recommendations were finalized following a consultative approach with the Country Office teams during field visits, and with the Regional Office team and the ERG in two separate workshops.

<b><i>Recommendation 1: ESARO should engage with UNFPA HQ in the reformulation of the next Strategic Plan to reinforce the position of the organization’s data mandate and ensure positioning of key regional issues.</i></b>		
Targeted at: ESARO Leadership Team UNFPA HQ	Derives from Finding: 3, 8	Links to Conclusion: 4, 6
Suggested Action Items		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider either moving away from the 3TRs as the ‘top line’ message or adding an additional TR related to population and development</li> <li>• Elevate ending sexual transmission of HIV in the Strategic Plan and highlight the linkages between the 3TRs and ending HIV</li> <li>• Reflect the intersectional nature of influencing social behaviour and gender norms across the entire mandate</li> </ul>		

<b><i>Recommendation 2: Building on the action items in recommendation 1, the next RPAP should even more directly embrace complexity and fluidity in the region, with a focus on building agile programming, targeted interventions and strengthening behavioural change.</i></b>		
Targeted at: ESARO Leadership Team RO Thematic and Operational Leads	Derives from Finding: 3, 4, 5, 7, 9	Links to Conclusion: 2, 4, 5, 6
Suggested Action Items: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reframe the next RPAP Theory of Change/Change Story to account for the complexity and fluidity of the context, including the need for ongoing agile responsiveness and long-term strategic foresight/futures thinking</li> <li>• Develop a cross-cutting (across thematic areas) strategy to target those populations for whom conventional approaches have not yet fully reached, such as youth</li> <li>• Develop a cross-cutting strategy for influencing behavioural change and gender and social norms</li> </ul>		

<b><i>Recommendation 3: ESARO should amplify the use of regional structures, partners and flagship joint programmes as a means of resource mobilization, advocacy and achieving scale.</i></b>		
Targeted at: ESARO Leadership Team RO Thematic and Operational Leads Key Regional Partners	Derives from Finding: 2, 10, 12, 13	Links to Conclusion: 2, 3, 5, 6
Suggested Action Items: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop cross-cutting strategies between programming, partners and resource mobilization to leverage credibility, relationships and programmatic synergies as support for the financing opportunities in the resource mobilization strategy</li> <li>• Develop a set of lessons learned from the flagship joint programmes that explores the ESARO's role in flagship programmes as a means of achieving scale on critical issues and the ways in which the UNFPA can advance its mandate in response to UN reforms</li> </ul>		

<b><i>Recommendation 4: ESARO should match RPAP outputs and regional needs with operational and workforce capacity.</i></b>		
Targeted at: ESARO Leadership Team RO Thematic and Operational Leads UNFPA HQ	Derives from Finding: 14, 15	Links to Conclusion: 3
Suggested Action Items: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a Regional Office staffing approach that responds to capacity gaps and supports skill development across thematic areas for integrating innovation and resilience</li> </ul>		



- Engage with UNFPA HQ in the development of agile business processes for contracting and payment that support the region’s adaptive management and strategic foresight approach
- Continue to work with UNFPA HQ to ensure that common back office procedures and other UN reforms support rather than hinder necessary autonomy and agility for the region

**Recommendation 5: ESARO should support Country Offices to elevate capacity to absorb and implement on key regional priorities in the RPAP.**

Targeted at: ESARO Leadership Team RO Thematic and Operational Leads Country Office Leadership Teams	Derives from Finding: 8, 11	Links to Conclusion: 1
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- Suggested Action Items:
- Develop a Country Office capacity strategy that systematically targets upskilling Country Office staff in critical thinking approaches including strategic foresight and futures thinking, training on the approaches and tools in the RPAP, and integrated approaches to resource mobilization, resilience and innovation
  - Evolve the country differentiated/ tailored approach to ensure alignment between MIC Country Office and the MIC Hub capacities
  - Work with Country Office leadership to ensure that Country Office Programmes and capacities include alignment with and support to Regional Programme outputs and the linkages and opportunities between the two programmes

**Recommendation 6: ESARO should continue to identify and develop strategies and adaptive planning to accelerate the response to emerging issues.**

Targeted at: ESARO Leadership Team RO Thematic and Operational Leads Country Office Leadership Teams Key Regional Partners	Derives from Finding: 3, 7, 9	Links to Conclusion: 1, 2, 4, 6
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- Suggested Action Items:
- Develop evidence, thought leadership and response mechanisms on current and emerging issues for the region, such as: aging populations, mental health in young people, the upward age trend for new HIV infections, the accountability of duty bearers
  - Develop a cohesive strategy to support the LGBTQ+ community across different country and cultural contexts
  - Develop a strategy including a threat risk assessment for anti-rights pushback that is regional and country contextual and builds opportunities and tools for partners to withstand and respond

**Recommendation 7: ESARO should articulate and promote its comparative advantage.**

Targeted at: ESARO Leadership Team RO Thematic and Operational Leads and Communications Team UNFPA HQ	Derives from Finding: 1, 6, 9, 13	Links to Conclusion: 2, 4, 5, 6
Suggested Action Items: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop an internal advocacy plan, with external strategic communications, that articulates the ESARO comparative advantage (compared to other UN agencies, external partners) with respect to population and development, data and evidence, flagship programme leadership, agile and innovative practices, and futures thinking</li><li>• Engage with UNFPA HQ to ensure communications are aligned to the plan and the comparative advantage</li></ul>		