

Formative evaluation of the UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Programme 2022-2025

Final Evaluation Report

Main Volume

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UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office	
Jennet Appova	Regional M&E Advisor
Independent Evaluation Team	
Alison King	Evaluation Team Leader
Katie Tong	Senior Evaluator

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADA	Austrian Development Agency
COD-PS	Common Operational Dataset on Population Statistics
CPD	Country Programme Document
CSO	Civil society organization
EECA	Eastern Europe and Central Asia
EECARO	UNFPA regional office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia
EQ	Evaluation question
ERG	Evaluation Reference Group
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GBV	Gender-based violence
GBVIE	Gender-based violence in emergencies
HDP	Humanitarian-development-peace
HQ	Headquarters
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IBC	Issue-based Coalition
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
IRRF	Integrated results and resources framework
KII	Key informant interview
LGBTQI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
LNOB	Leaving no one behind
MIC	Middle-income country
MISP	Minimum Initial Service Package for SRH in Crisis Situations
MTR	Mid-term review
PoA	Programme of Action
PSA	Population Situation Analysis
PSG	Peer Support Group
PwD	People with disabilities
QCPR	Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system
RCP	Regional Collaborative Platform
RPE	Regional programme evaluation
RR	Reproductive rights
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SPE	Strategic plan evaluation
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
SSTC	South-South and triangular cooperation

ToR	Terms of reference
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group

Executive Summary

Purpose, Objectives and Scope

This formative evaluation of the UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) Regional Programme (RPE) for 2022-2025 was planned as part of the UNFPA Quadrennial Budgeted Evaluation Plan 2022-2025. In line with the Strategic Plan evaluation (SPE), its objective is to assess UNFPA's organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate progress towards achieving the transformative results in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) region and - by the end of the next strategic plan - to have tackled unfinished business. It aims to provide feedback for the remainder of the current regional programme cycle, inform the design of the 2026-2029 regional programme, and contribute to the SPE. The evaluation results may also help inform the 12 UNFPA country programme documents (CPDs) currently being developed in the EECA region.

The evaluation focuses on assessing the contributions of the UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional office (EECARO) to the operationalization of the UNFPA strategic plan's six accelerators and selected strategic shifts in 12 countries of the EECA region, selected by EECARO. It also examines enabling factors like strategic communications and knowledge management. The primary audience of the RPE is EECARO management and staff, to whom recommendations are addressed.

Methodology and Process

The evaluation is utility-focused. Data for three evaluation questions, complete with sub-questions and indicators, was collected from the regional and country levels. The evaluation team employed a mixed-methods approach. The team interviewed 101 key informants (F: 63; M: 38) from across UNFPA (66), other UN agencies (6), donors (2) and partners (27). It also reviewed over 100 documents. The evaluation report is complemented by two "deep dives" on demographic resilience and humanitarian preparedness and response and two country notes for Moldova and Uzbekistan, which the evaluation team visited for more in-depth data gathering.

The evaluation faced challenges such as stakeholders' time constraints, varying levels of focus on EECARO's contributions, and inconsistent evidence availability across countries. These challenges were addressed through extended data collection periods, focused interview probing, and data triangulation from multiple sources.

Background

The EECA region faces challenges, including declining fertility rates, ageing populations, outmigration, political instability, the impact of COVID-19 and other crises, especially the war in Ukraine. Despite progress, gaps remain in achieving UNFPA's transformative results of zero preventable maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning, and zero gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful practices by 2030.

The UNFPA regional programme aims to improve sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and reproductive rights (RR) while accelerating the implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action by providing strategic support and technical advice to the UNFPA country offices in the region. The programme seeks to address critical issues in the region and contribute to broader development goals, including those related to countries' European Union accession ambitions.

Summary of Findings

[To what extent have the accelerators supported enhanced programming within EECA?](#) While all accelerators are relevant to the EECA region, the RPE shows that gender-transformative approaches, data and evidence, as well as South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) and private-sector partnerships, are programmatic adaptations particularly supportive of scaling up results and achieving long-term positive impact. The war in Ukraine and the escalated conflict over the Karabakh region have

demonstrated the need for UNFPA to invest more in national resilience and adaptation to crises in a region that, until recently, has been stable with an emphasis on development cooperation and upstream work. UNFPA organizational units require more support for operationalizing innovation and digitalization and for targeting intersectional vulnerabilities as part of leaving no one behind (LNOB).

To what extent have strategic shifts supported enhanced programming within EECA? The most prominent shifts in the EECA region are UNFPA's strategic positioning in the area of demographic intelligence and resilience in response to government concerns related to population changes with potential implications for women's rights and as a humanitarian actor in response to the war in Ukraine and the persisting conflict surrounding the Karabakh region. Regarding other megatrends, UNFPA has also taken critical first steps to integrate the effects of GBV in the digital space into its programming. Still, there is room for improving migration and climate change-related considerations. Given these and other dominant needs in SRHR (e.g., cervical cancer and HIV prevention), a narrow focus on achieving the transformative results does not appear appropriate. The shift from funding to financing has not been effectively launched across the region, given a continued need for UNFPA funding.

To what extent have enablers facilitated the implementation of the accelerators and strategic shifts within EECA? Regional/multi-country programmes, often facilitated by EECARO, have greatly enabled the implementation of county programmes, including the accelerators and strategic shifts, as have sub-regional clusters led by UNFPA country directors and the delegation of authority to country offices to determine modes of engagement. On the other hand, corporate knowledge management has much potential but has emerged as a significant weakness. The UNFPA resource allocation and distribution system (RAS/RDS), focusing on Tier I countries, does not provide country offices in EECA with a critical mass of predictable resources. A stronger corporate emphasis on European Union accession considerations for Eastern Europe would be welcomed.

Conclusions

The six conclusions straddle the interlinked accelerators, strategic shifts and enablers for accelerating progress towards the transformative results. Conclusions 1 through 4 provide a synthesized overview of the overarching themes identified across the entire spectrum of evaluation questions and sub-questions. These themes encompass corporate concepts and guidance (Conclusion 1), regional programme design (Conclusion 2), implementation support (Conclusion 3) and the relevance of transformative results for the EECA region (Conclusion 4). Conclusions 5 and 6 offer a more in-depth analysis of the two primary focus areas of the evaluation - i.e., demographic resilience and humanitarian preparedness and response.

Conclusion 1: EECARO was tasked with integrating and rolling out the accelerators and strategic shifts designed to expedite progress towards the transformative results without the benefit of clarity of concepts, precision of expectations or comprehensive guidance. The concepts of accelerators and strategic shifts, as outlined in UNFPA's strategic plan, need clear definitions and overlap significantly. Moreover, many of these concepts represent ongoing practices, but shifts in corporate expectations are unclear. Due to insufficient guidance and communication from UNFPA headquarters (HQ), the EECA regional office has struggled to integrate accelerators and strategic shifts into its programming. This lack of clarity and direction has delayed effective implementation and potentially reduced the overall impact of these initiatives.

Conclusion 2: The EECA regional programme design for 2022-2025 does not sufficiently reflect a clear strategy for prioritizing and implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts within the EECA region and its sub-regions. A more rigorous strategic approach is warranted for the subsequent regional programme cycle. The EECA regional programme for 2022-2025 falls short of effectively integrating UNFPA's accelerators and strategic shifts. The programme lacks a clear strategy outlining how these concepts will be applied to achieve regional outputs. Despite challenges in finalizing the regional programme before fully developing the UNFPA strategic plan, the programme could have outlined a clear path forward for utilizing these tools. The upcoming development of the 2026-2029 regional

programme presents an opportunity to rectify this by prioritizing and tailoring accelerators and strategic shifts to the EECA context and ensuring effective implementation.

Conclusion 3: The EECA region is among those demonstrating considerable progress towards the transformative results, with EECARO playing a pivotal supportive role in operationalizing the accelerators and strategic shifts to achieve country-level outputs. Nevertheless, significant challenges at the country level remain, and opportunities for further advancement should be considered. While EECARO has contributed to increased understanding and implementation of accelerators and strategic shifts at the country level, this impact cannot be solely attributed to the UNFPA strategic plan or the EECA regional programme. Increased focus on specific areas like private sector partnerships, South-South cooperation, data generation, and humanitarian capacity building has been largely context-driven. Continued and focused efforts are required to sustain and accelerate progress, particularly in areas facing challenges and setbacks.

Conclusion 4: UNFPA's global focus on the transformative results and their corresponding indicators, as outlined in the UNFPA strategic plan, overlooks significant regional priorities and opportunities within the organization's mandate. This narrow focus could put UNFPA's role in EECA at risk in the future. A broader look at interlinkages and what is needed in the region would be helpful. The EECA region is progressing towards UNFPA's transformative results, but challenges remain, particularly for vulnerable populations. However, the focus of governments in the region on addressing population decline and ageing has shifted the emphasis away from some of UNFPA's core areas. UNFPA's role in data collection and analysis is crucial for supporting socio-economic development, particularly in middle-income countries. To remain relevant, UNFPA should, therefore, consider repositioning itself within the post-2030 agenda, focusing on data and development while also addressing the evolving challenges of SRHR. Additionally, UNFPA should reframe its approach to the unmet need for family planning in light of declining fertility rates and invest more in collecting comparable GBV data.

Conclusion 5: UNFPA's focus on demographic resilience, initiated during the 2018-2021 strategic plan cycle, constitutes a critical response to the pronounced megatrend of population ageing and decline across the EECA region. Commendable progress has been made to date, and the development of the following regional programme presents an opportunity to enhance the framework's adaptability to other megatrends and effectively address the diverse demographic landscapes within the region. UNFPA's Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia has effectively supported countries in navigating challenges such as ageing populations, low fertility and outmigration. The programme's emphasis on a rights-based approach and its expansion to include high-fertility countries demonstrate its adaptability. While the programme is grounded in strong human rights and gender-transformative principles, further development is needed to realize its full potential. Integrating additional megatrends, such as migration, and adapting the framework for fragile and humanitarian contexts will enhance its effectiveness.

Conclusion 6: In recent years, the humanitarian preparedness and response accelerator and strategic shift have assumed increased importance within the EECA region. To effectively address growing needs, UNFPA's regional programme for 2026-2029 should accord these elements greater prominence. The EECA region, traditionally focused on development, has been significantly impacted by recent crises, notably the war in Ukraine. This shift has necessitated a heightened focus on humanitarian response and preparedness within UNFPA's regional programming. While initially unprepared for the scale of these crises, UNFPA has successfully enhanced its humanitarian capabilities, bolstering its strategic position and visibility. Simultaneously, there is a growing recognition of the importance of strengthening national emergency preparedness efforts to safeguard development gains. However, sustained and strategic allocation of financial and human resources for humanitarian preparedness and response remains a challenge. To improve future response, UNFPA should prioritize evidence-based decision-making on resource allocation and further integrate resilience and humanitarian components into its regional programming.

Recommendations

Structured from a strategic (Recommendations 1-3), programmatic (Recommendations 4-7) and operational (Recommendations 8-9) perspective, the recommendations are made in light of further acceleration of progress towards the transformative results and exploration of new directions based on the EECA region's needs and priorities. They assume that, in principle, the assigned roles of the UNFPA regional office remain unchanged and that family planning, maternal health and the elimination of GBV and other harmful practices remain at the core of the next UNFPA strategic plan while the world and UNFPA start to transition to a post-2030 agenda.

Recommendation 1. Aligned with the evolving organizational priorities, EECARO should collaborate with UNFPA HQ to reinforce the organization's data mandate and further expand its data and analytics work. It should advocate for a fourth transformative result focused on population data as an entry point to reemphasize population dynamics, work with partners to improve GBV data collection and reporting based on standardized methodologies, and explore the linkages between data and other accelerators and strategic shifts, particularly LNOB.

Recommendation 2. EECARO should develop a more comprehensive framework for its work on demographic resilience that applies to all countries regardless of their demographic trajectory, that is suitable for humanitarian and fragile/post-conflict contexts and that links to other megatrends. In this connection, it should advocate for a broadened conceptualization of family planning beyond contraceptive methods and collaborate with UNFPA HQ to clarify the organization's mandate and role regarding ageing.

Recommendation 3. In a situation of high demands on development aid, EECARO should prioritize leveraging financing for SRHR, GBV and population development while concurrently advocating to UNFPA HQ for the sustained allocation and mobilization of adequate funding to UNFPA programmes in MIC contexts. It should promote a "transition from funding to funding and financing" approach and collaborate with HQ to identify indicators for tracking, reporting and communicating the successful leveraging of development financing to increase motivation and recognition and give credit.

Recommendation 4. Based on a clear understanding of EECARO's role vis-à-vis the UNFPA Programme and Humanitarian Response Divisions, EECARO should expand its support for enhancing national preparedness for and resilience to emergencies by, among other things, investing more time in environmental scanning and foresight to anticipate future changes and prepare for and adapt to crises, and establishing a coordination mechanism for better exchange on national resilience and adaptation among UNFPA country offices in the EECA region.

Recommendation 5. EECARO should develop and implement a results-oriented regional strategy to solidify and consolidate UNFPA's commitment to gender-transformative approaches. It should ensure consistency with the United Nations' broader approach to gender equality; clearly articulate gender norms and social norms, adapting global definitions to regional contexts; establish a practical framework to categorize programmes based on their level of gender responsiveness (neutral, responsive, transformative); and delineate UNFPA's unique contribution to gender-transformative work compared to UN Women.

Recommendation 6. Drawing upon the results of the ongoing global evaluation of UNFPA's support of the leaving no one behind principle, EECARO should formulate a distinct LNOB strategy for the region, which should serve as a unifying framework for diverse funding sources and integrate data programming as a cornerstone for identifying and reaching vulnerable populations. It should prioritize inclusivity, going beyond people with disabilities (PwD), while leveraging digital and other innovations and incorporating megatrends.

Recommendation 7. EECARO should develop a region-specific innovation framework encompassing, but not limited to, digitalization that serves as a foundation for defining and fostering innovation and digital advancements within UNFPA's development and humanitarian programming at the regional level throughout 2026-2029.

Recommendation 8. Within the framework of available funding, EECARO should formulate a multi-year human resources plan to ensure adequate regional and country-level staffing is in place to enable relevant and effective programming during the forthcoming 2026-2029 regional programme cycle. Furthermore, EECARO should develop actions to increase the recruitment of persons from left-behind groups to meaningful and decision-making roles at country and regional levels and across different thematic areas, not just in terms of LNOB programming.

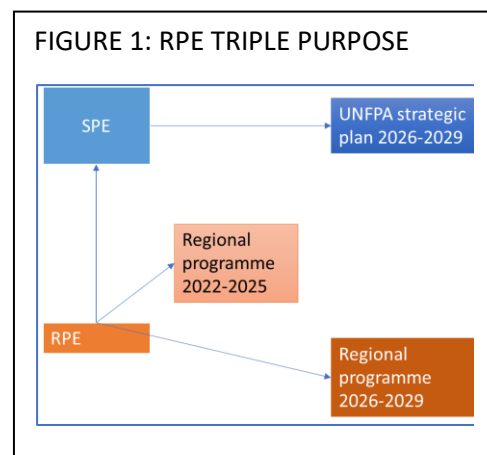
Recommendation 9. EECARO should formulate a plan to implement the UNFPA Knowledge Management Strategy (2024-2030) within the EECA region, including strengthening knowledge exchange across UNFPA country offices in the region and beyond and leveraging United Nations-wide knowledge management hubs.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Objective of the Evaluation

1. The UNFPA Evaluation Office has commissioned an independent formative evaluation of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025, which will feed into UNFPA-internal consultations and UNFPA Executive Board debates on the UNFPA strategic plan 2026-2029 design.¹ The strategic plan evaluation (SPE) is being conducted in parallel with a mid-term review (MTR) of the UNFPA strategic plan and integrated budget for 2022-2025, for which the UNFPA Policy and Strategy Division is responsible.
2. Simultaneously, as part of a global package, the UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (EECARO) initiated a formative evaluation of its regional programme 2022-2025, hereafter referred to as Regional Programme Evaluation (RPE). The EECA RPE is one of six RPEs conducted in a coordinated manner with the SPE, both in terms of timing and methodology. It was planned as part of the UNFPA Quadrennial Budgeted Evaluation Plan 2022-2025.

3. The triple *purpose* of the RPE is to (i) provide feedback for consideration during the remainder of the 2022-2025 regional programme cycle; (ii) provide evidence to inform the design of the EECA regional programme 2026-2029; and (iii) make inputs available for the SPE (see Figure 1). The evaluation results may also help inform the 12 UNFPA country programme documents (CPDs) that are currently being developed in the EECA region.



4. The RPE is forward-looking. In line with the SPE, its *objective* is to assess UNFPA’s organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate progress towards achieving the transformative results in the EECA region and - by the end of the next strategic plan - to have tackled unfinished business.
5. The RPE’s primary audience is EECARO management and staff, to whom recommendations are addressed. EECARO partners, UNFPA headquarters (HQ), and UNFPA country offices in the region are secondary addressees. Recommendations to EECARO will be made based on evidence gathered regarding the extent to which
 - the transformative results are achievable for UNFPA in the EECA region;
 - the strategic shifts and accelerators are appropriate to achieve the transformative results in the EECA region; and
 - EECARO should explore new directions based on the needs and priorities of the region.

1.2 Scope of the Evaluation

6. The evaluation scope includes all “accelerators” and selected “strategic shifts” included in the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 across all regional programme outputs from the start of 2022 until the end of data collection in May 2024. The SPE identified “enablers” that should facilitate the operationalization of the accelerators and strategic shifts, notably strategic communication, human resource strategies and management, knowledge management, and the UNFPA business model. These enablers are also included in the scope of the RPE.
7. The evaluation covers 12 of the 17 countries supported by EECARO and UNFPA country offices. The following criteria were applied to select countries: a good balance and representation of Tier II and Tier III countries; equal representation of countries that developed their CPDs before, during

¹ UNPFA. Formative Evaluation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Inception Report. 2023.

and after the 2022-2025 SP introduction; equal representation of the country clusters; a good balance of countries with humanitarian or nexus-focused approach programmes; and consideration of countries to be covered by the SPE.

1.3 Methodology and Process

1.3.1 Overall Methodological Approach

8. The RPE's overall methodological approach was designed to specifically conform to the terms of reference (ToR) for the evaluation and, in general, to UNFPA and United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) standards. Aligning with the SPE, it was designed as a formative evaluation with a strong focus on utility for EECARO. The overarching principles of the RPE remain, as identified in the inception note:
 - utility-focused; and
 - coherence with the global evaluation process.
9. The development of the evaluation started with conceptualizing the approach, in consultation with the Evaluation Manager and the SPE team, by designing a guiding framework focused on the relevance and implementation of the accelerators and strategic shifts of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. This was then used as a foundation to develop three evaluation questions, complete with sub-questions and guiding indicators, which form the evaluation matrix (see Annex 1). The evaluation questions and sub-questions are also listed in Box 1 for ease of reference.

BOX 1: RPE QUESTIONS AND SUB-QUESTIONS

EQ1: To what extent have the accelerators identified in the UNFPA strategic plan supported enhanced programming in the EECA region?

- 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 have facilitating or hindering factors affected the utilization of the six accelerators in the region?

EQ2: To what extent have strategic shifts provided for in the UNFPA strategic plan supported enhanced programming within the EECA region?

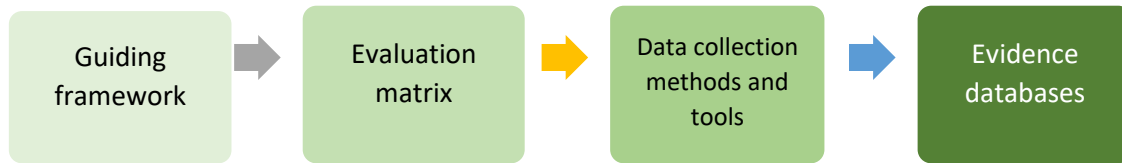
- 2.1 To what extent have low fertility and ageing been addressed through the regional programme, as well as other megatrends?
- 2.2 To what extent has the regional programme expanded UNFPA's humanitarian response capacity to better safeguard the lives of women, adolescents and youth?
- 2.3 To what extent has EECARO ensured regional organizational focus on achieving the transformative results by 2030 while also ensuring that programmatic and technical assistance is tailored to better respond to local contexts (through a country office-led process within the United Nations family on the ground)?
- 2.4 To what extent has the regional programme embraced the funding to financing agenda to accelerate progress towards the transformative results?
- 2.5 To what extent has EECARO played and supported a stronger normative role for UNFPA in the region?

EQ3: To what extent have the enablers facilitated the implementation of the accelerators and strategic shifts foreseen in the UNFPA strategic plan within the EECA region?

- 3.1 To what extent has strategic communication facilitated EECARO's efforts to operationalize the accelerators and strategic shifts in the region?
- 3.2 To what extent has knowledge management facilitated EECARO's efforts to operationalize the accelerators and strategic shifts in the region?
- 3.3 To what extent has the UNFPA business model facilitated EECARO's efforts to operationalize the accelerators and strategic shifts in the region?
- 3.4 To what extent have other enablers, such as human resource strategies and management, supported the operationalization of the accelerators and shifts in the region?

10. From this, data collection tools and interview protocols (see Annex 2) were designed to gather the information and evidence required to answer the evaluation questions. Data was collated in evidence databases (see Figure 2).

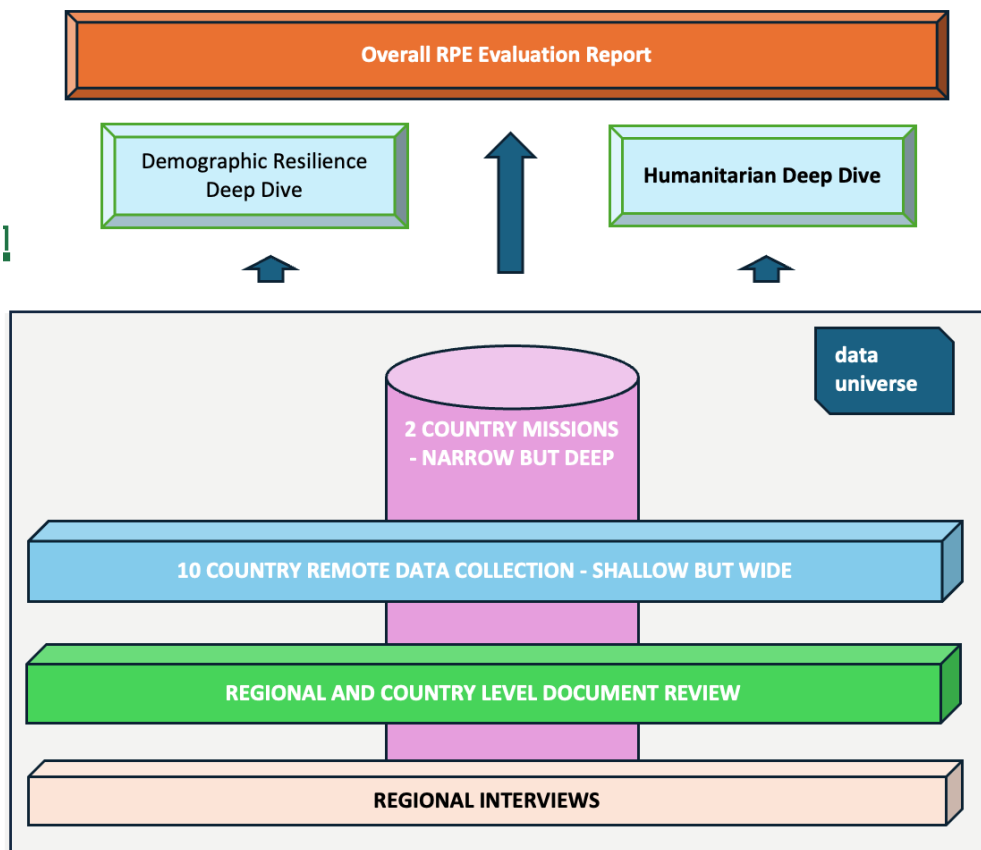
FIGURE 2: EVALUATION APPROACH PROCESS



11. The evaluation collected data across the following different levels (see Figure 3):

- Regional level: document review and interviews with UNFPA regional staff and regional partners;
- Document review and two country missions to Moldova and Uzbekistan for more in-depth country data collection;
- Ten additional countries for remote country data collection (document review and selected interviews), providing a wide but shallow perspective; and
- Two “deep dive” analyses of demographic resilience and humanitarian preparedness and response framed by extracting evidence collected through the overall evaluation process relating to these issues (see Annex 3 and Annex 4).

FIGURE 3: RELATIONSHIP OF LEVELS OF DATA COLLECTION



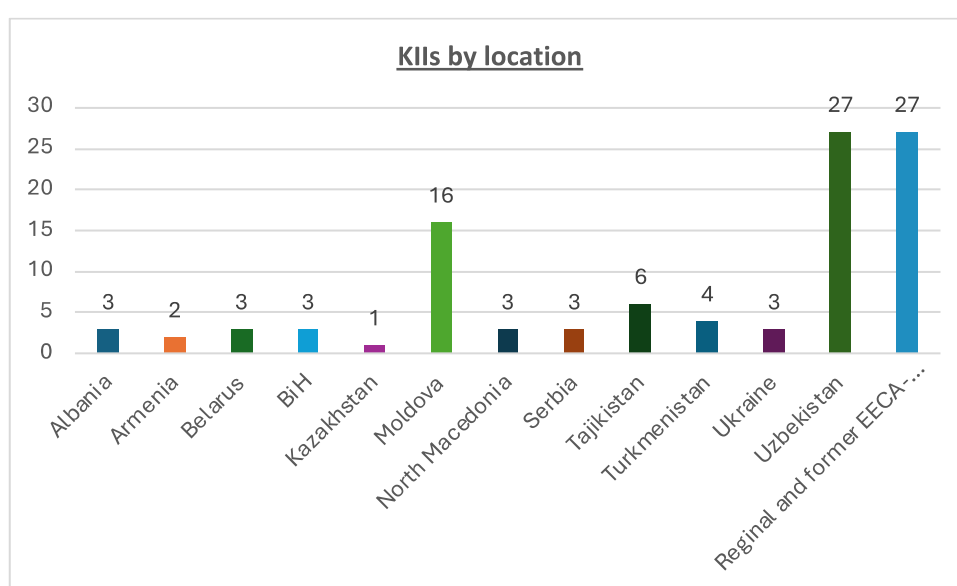
Source: RPE team based on RPE ToR and SPE inception report

12. The RPE was managed by the UNFPA Regional Monitoring & Evaluation Advisor and guided by an evaluation reference group (ERG) with the participation of UNFPA regional and country staff and selected regional partners.

1.3.2 Evaluation Data Universe

13. The evaluation included interviewing 101 key informants (F: 63; M: 38) from across UNFPA (66), other United Nations agencies (6), donors (2) and partners (27) at regional and country levels (see Annex 5 and Figure 4). In particular, the evaluation team contacted EECARO senior management and advisors; UNFPA representatives and heads of office in the 12 countries within the scope of the RPE; and key regional and country-level programme staff, including humanitarian, population development, communications and resource mobilization staff. Based on a stakeholder map by EECARO, it attempted to consult two regional partners per regional programme output. The evaluation team also reviewed over 100 documents (see Annex 6).

FIGURE 4: KEY INFORMANTS BY LOCATION



Source: RPE team

1.3.3 Description of Coding and Analysis

14. Evidence databases (Excel sheets) were established for each data “set” - i.e., for each country included in the evaluation's scope and the regional level. Evidence from interviews and document review was collated under the specific sub-questions, with annotations by evaluators for linkages.

15. Data analysis was first conducted on each data set, with analysis framed into stated findings at this level. This resulted in two country notes for Moldova and Uzbekistan, country tables for the other ten countries and a table for EECARO.² Each finding was coded vis-à-vis the strength of the evidence (strong, medium, weak). Considerations for EECARO were formulated at the level of each data set.

16. The evaluation team then compiled all findings by sub-question and reviewed, compared and balanced the data. At this stage, anomalies and contradictions were investigated to ensure the final overarching finding is as robust as possible. Findings were then tested against the evidence and confirmed. Evidence and analyses were methodologically drawn from EECARO and different country studies to substantiate the findings.

1.3.4 Challenges

² Forthwith referred to as “studies” in the footnotes.

17. Presented in Table 1 is a description of overall challenges, together with mitigation measures.

TABLE 1: GENERAL CHALLENGES AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Challenges	Mitigation Measures and Impact on the RPE
Ensuring all relevant persons could participate in the evaluation was a challenge, with UNFPA colleagues, in particular, being very busy and time-constrained.	This was a challenge throughout the evaluation data collection phase. One mitigating factor built into the evaluation was an extended data collection period - from March until May - which allowed for follow-up for key interviewees who struggled to engage. A further mitigation measure was utilizing the support of the evaluation manager for follow-up.
In many instances, country office staff tended to discuss country office efforts and activities without obvious linkages to EECARO support. In Moldova and Uzbekistan, Implementing Partners were not necessarily aware of the role played by EECARO.	The evaluation team continuously worked to shift conversations back to regional support (past support and the need for future support) when they diverted to country-level achievements. This remained a challenge throughout the data collection period.
For the 10 UNFPA country office remote reviews, it was challenging to obtain enough primary data evidence to triangulate with secondary data evidence (document review) to provide robust findings, given that the interviews were limited to only a few UNFPA staff in each country.	The evaluation considered that even weak evidence at the country level could provide strong evidence at the compilation level, where trends across countries could be identified.
There were different perspectives on credit for activities and programmes from the country and regional levels.	The evaluation team concludes that differences of opinion regarding contribution and attribution are understandable and quite standard. It ensured that all data was triangulated across country-level UNFPA interviews, EECARO interviews, partner interviews (where possible), and documentation, including regional reports, which provide a detailed account of regional office support to countries.

2. Background

2.1 EECA Context

2.1.1 General Context in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

18. The EECA regional programme 2022-2025 was drafted throughout 2020 and 2021 in parallel with the drafting of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. Covering 17 middle-income countries (MICs)³, it was situated and has been implemented within an external context characterized by:

- increasing demographic anxiety due to demographic change as a result of low fertility and ageing populations, especially in the Eastern Europe, Western Balkans and Caucasus sub-regions, coupled with outmigration towards the European Union and the Russian Federation, including a significant number of young people in search of education, training, employment, better health and participation in decision-making processes (see Table 2);

³ Albania (upper-middle-income), Armenia (upper-middle-income), Azerbaijan (upper-middle-income), Belarus (upper-middle-income), Bosnia & Herzegovina (upper-middle-income), Republic of Georgia (upper-middle-income), Kazakhstan (upper-middle-income), Kosovo (UNSCR 1244) (upper-middle-income), Kyrgyzstan (lower-middle-income), Moldova (upper-middle-income), North Macedonia (upper-middle-income), Serbia (upper-middle-income), Tajikistan (lower-middle-income), Türkiye (upper-middle-income), Turkmenistan (upper-middle-income), Ukraine (lower-middle-income), Uzbekistan (lower-middle-income).

TABLE 2: TOTAL FERTILITY RATES, 2024

Country	Population	Total fertility rate (TFR)	Population aged 65 and over	Below replacement level?
Albania	2.8 million	1.4	18%	Yes
Armenia	2.8 million	1.6	14%	Yes
Bosnia & Herzegovina	3.2 million	1.3	19%	Yes
Belarus	9.5 million	1.5	18%	Yes
Kazakhstan	19.8 million	3.0	8%	No
Moldova	3.3 million	1.8	13%	Yes
North Macedonia	2.1 million	1.4	16%	Yes
Serbia	7.1 million	1.5	21%	Yes
Tajikistan	10.3 million	3.1	4%	No
Turkmenistan	6.6 million	2.6	6%	No
Ukraine	37.9 million	1.3	20%	Yes
Uzbekistan	35.7 million	2.7	6%	No

Source: RPE team based on UNFPA World Population Dashboard⁴

- an increase in the number of people affected by political turbulence, acute emergencies or protracted crises, whether natural disasters or man-made conflicts. Seven of the 17 countries are considered medium or high risk in the 2024 INFORM Risk Index (see Table 3). Over recent years, UNFPA has sought humanitarian funding for Armenia (2024), Belarus (2023-2024), Bosnia & Herzegovina (2020-2022), Moldova (2023-2024), Poland (2023-2024), Slovakia (2023-2024), Türkiye (2020-2024) and Ukraine (2020-2024). Ukraine ranked among UNFPA's top ten humanitarian crises in 2023 and 2024⁵;

TABLE 3: RANKING OF EECA PROGRAMME COUNTRIES IN THE INFORM RISK INDEX 2020-2024

	Medium Risk	High Risk
2020	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine	Türkiye
2021	Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine	Türkiye
2022	Bosnia & Herzegovina, Georgia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Ukraine	Armenia, Azerbaijan
2023	Armenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Tajikistan, Türkiye	Azerbaijan, Ukraine
2024	Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Uzbekistan	Ukraine

Source: RPE team based on INFORM Risk Index 2020-2024

⁴ <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard>.

⁵ See UNFPA Humanitarian Action Overviews 2020-2024. Note: Poland and Slovakia are not UNFPA programme countries.

- the COVID-19 pandemic that has rendered the domestic economies fragile and affected the health and socio-economic situation of 250 million people in the region, particularly young people, older people and women and girls. COVID-19 also significantly increased women's time burden due to an increase in unpaid care and domestic work as care services shut down and confinement measures were taken. Meeting unpaid care needs led many women to reduce their working hours or quit altogether. This has long-term consequences on gender equality as it exacerbates lifecycle inequalities, leading to an increased risk of poverty in older women, which in turn increases the burden on social services, making it harder and costlier for countries to be more demographically resilient. Mental health has emerged as a specific concern;
- shifting traditional donor priorities away from EECA due to the relative stability and economic growth of the region as a whole and pressing needs in other regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, and away from sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) towards global challenges such as climate change and migration;
- growing conservatism and pushback against women's rights, resulting in the reinforcement of traditional and harmful gender norms, as well as punitive laws, stigma, discriminatory attitudes and violence against people living with HIV, key populations and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex persons (LGBTQI) and a shrinking space for progressive civil society;
- population data systems that are lagging behind other MICs in terms of their maturity and reliability to provide current and transparent evidence for well-informed policymaking, including regarding family planning and gender-based violence (GBV); and
- high levels of tertiary education and considerably improved availability and affordability of internet connectivity.

2.1.2 Status of UNFPA's Transformative Results in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

19. The UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 replaced the colour quadrants of previous strategic plans with the concept of *tiers*, which show the distance of countries to the transformative results and are also used for allocating core resources to the UNFPA country offices.
- Tier 1: No transformative results have been achieved
 - Tier 2: Two of the three transformative results have not been achieved
 - Tier 3: One or zero of the three transformative results have not been achieved
20. At the beginning of the strategic plan cycle, all 17 EECA countries had achieved at least one transformative result. Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Türkiye had achieved one transformative result (Tier 2). Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan had achieved two or three transformative results (Tier 3).
21. In recent years, countries in the EECA region have made further progress towards UNFPA's transformative results. However, challenges for those left furthest behind and societies in general remain.⁶ To the extent available, information and data do not reflect an overall acceleration of progress. This resonates with the reality that the world is falling short of meeting most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030: While certain areas have witnessed progress, a concerning proportion of targets are either progressing too slowly or regressing. Yet others lack

⁶ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. Annex 4.5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme.19 July 2021.

sufficient data for taking stock.⁷ A preliminary look at the status of the transformative results in EECA⁸ reveals that:

- impressive gains have been experienced in most countries of the region, such as an increase in the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel from an already high 95% in 2015 to 96% in 2022.⁹ However, a continued high lifetime risk of maternal death remains in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Cervical cancer incidence and mortality rates were - and continue to be - much higher than in the European Union due to a lack of effective prevention programmes, even though a decrease is evident: from 21,000 registered deaths and 46,000 new cases at the time of formulating the regional programme to more than 16,000 deaths and 32,000 new cases¹⁰;
- uneven access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information, education, and services remains prevalent in the region, and the unmet need for family planning has stayed relatively high, particularly for people with disabilities (PWD), young people, marginalized groups and those living in fragile settings.¹¹ This has resulted, among other things, in adolescent fertility rates of up to 57 per 1,000¹² and in many countries, young women and girls resorting to abortion as a family planning method. In some countries, demographic anxiety has led to the formulation of pro-natalist policies aimed at limiting women's access to sexual and reproductive rights;
- the region has seen only limited progress towards ending GBV and harmful practices, notably child marriage and gender-based sex selection (GBSS).¹³ In 2019, 70% of women had experienced some form of violence in their lifetime, with 31% experiencing physical or sexual violence in Eastern Europe. More recent data are unavailable, but evidence shows that the COVID-19 pandemic undermined existing GBV response efforts and increased GBV.¹⁴

22. While not a transformative result, an outcome indicator, “number of new HIV infections”, was introduced in the strategic plan 2022-2025 as a common indicator for the family planning and maternal health transformative results. While new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths have been declining globally, they have been increasing in the EECA region, and the trend remains of significant concern. According to the latest available data, HIV infections in the region have increased by 49% since 2010, resulting in a total of 2 million people living with HIV.¹⁵ The overall HIV prevalence rate is significantly higher among key populations that, together with their sexual partners, account for 95% of all new HIV infections: 7.2% among people who inject drugs, 4.3% among gay men and other men who have sex with men, 2% among sex workers, and 1.7% among transgender people.¹⁶ Despite its significant concern, the coverage of HIV prevention and treatment services remains insufficient in EECA: Only 28.3% of youth aged 15-25 years in the region can correctly identify ways to prevent HIV and reject major misconceptions. Only 62% of people

⁷ United Nations. 2023. The Sustainable Development Goals Report. Special Edition. 2023.

⁸ Annex 1: Output scorecard and indicator updates, 2022 - Progress in implementing the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 provides data for further exploration.

⁹ United Nations. 2023. The Sustainable Development Goals Report. Special Edition. 2023.

¹⁰ See EECA RPE terms of reference.

¹¹ Data availability is a problem as regards family planning indicators.

¹² Data used in the EECA regional programme. In Tajikistan.

¹³ Despite, for Members of the Council of Europe, the entry into force in August 2014 of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Albania (ratified), Armenia (signed), Azerbaijan (-), Bosnia & Herzegovina (ratified), Republic of Georgia (ratified), North Macedonia (ratified), Serbia (Serbia), Türkiye (denounced), Ukraine (ratified).

¹⁴ See EECA RPE terms of reference.

¹⁵ See EECA RPE terms of reference.

¹⁶ See EECA RPE terms of reference.

living with HIV know their status and only 51% of people living with HIV have access to antiretroviral therapy.¹⁷

2.2 Strategic Planning in UNFPA

2.2.1 UNFPA Strategic Plans

23. Like the other New York-based United Nations funds and programmes, UNFPA produces a four-year strategic plan that starts the year after the approval of the General Assembly resolution on the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System (QCPR). UNFPA strategic plans are approved by the Executive Board of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS, and implementation progress is reported annually by the UNFPA Executive Director.
24. The UNFPA strategic plan 2018-2021, including its integrated results and resources framework (IRRF) and underpinned by a business model and an integrated budget, was the first of three consecutive strategic plans intended to cumulatively achieve three transformative results by 2030 in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Programme of Action (PoA) of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) - i.e., zero preventable maternal mortality, zero unmet need for family planning and zero GBV and harmful practices, including FGM and child, early and forced marriage.
25. While the previous strategic plan 2018-2021 was designed to set the vision and chart the pathway towards the transformative results, the current strategic plan 2022-2025 should accelerate and scale up progress. The third strategic plan for 2026-2029 should tackle unfinished business. The acceleration of the transformative results is directly reflected as outcome statements in the IRRF of the strategic plan 2022-2025.
26. The UNFPA strategic plan lists six accelerators and 12 strategic shifts to accelerate progress towards the transformative results. The SPE inception report discusses these in some detail.¹⁸ It lays out how the accelerators and strategic shifts overlap and how they are a mix of different types of actions - i.e., on the one hand, adjustments where an important strategic shift was deemed necessary and, on the other hand, programmatic amplifications where UNFPA is expected to do more of something it is already doing at the programme level. The SPE inception report also differentiates between “shifts in what UNFPA does” and “shifts in the way UNFPA leverages the work and resources of others”. In other words, some accelerators and strategic shifts are more internally focused, and others have implications for the organization’s external relations.
27. This RPE has adopted this interpretation (see Annex 7). Annex 7, Table 1 shows that all accelerators except for one (data and evidence) are mirrored in the strategic shifts and that most accelerators and strategic shifts are programmatic amplifications (rather than strategic adjustments). Table 2 shows that more accelerators and strategic shifts are inward rather than outward-looking.

2.2.2 UNFPA Regional Programmes

28. The UNFPA regional office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECARO) in Istanbul provides strategic support and technical expertise to the UNFPA country offices. The role of the regional office is to deliver policy advice, guidance, training and support to empower colleagues and partners in the field. The regional office anticipates and responds to challenges.¹⁹

¹⁷ Global AIDS Monitoring 2023: <https://aidsinfo.unaids.org/> Data available for nine countries of the EECA region. See EECA RPE terms of reference.

¹⁸ Note: Annex 2 of the strategic plan talks in more detail to the accelerators and strategies for the accelerators to enhance performance in the achievement of the strategic plan outputs.

¹⁹ <https://eeeca.unfpa.org/en/node/9267>.

29. The UNFPA regional programmes are aligned to and an integral part of the UNFPA strategic plans and, as such, are also approved by the Executive Board.²⁰ While the priorities and expected results for each regional programme are detailed in individual regional programme documents, including IRRFs, the specific objectives of all regional programmes for 2022-2025²¹ are
- promoting advocacy and intergovernmental policy dialogue on laws and policies towards the realization of the transformative results;
 - building national capacities to deliver the essential package of SRH and reproductive rights (RR) interventions, applying equity in access, quality of care and accountability across the implementation;
 - promoting and supporting the integration of social and gender norms change through the implementation of global-level normative guidance on social norms, as well as through gender-transformative behaviour-change interventions;
 - strengthening the capacities of countries, partners and UNFPA country offices to collect, analyse and utilize sex, age and location-disaggregated data, including data that captures the multiple discriminations faced by populations left furthest behind;
 - amplifying the scale and use of generated knowledge products to benefit all countries;
 - providing technical and programmatic advisory support to countries, partners and UNFPA country offices, including support and oversight of country programme development, monitoring and evaluation; and
 - equipping national partners and actors with norms and standards, including knowledge products, with a focus on adapting normative evidence and tools to the regional context.

2.2.3 The UNFPA Regional Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2022-2025

30. The UNFPA Executive Board approved the EECA regional programme 2022-2025 at its second regular session in 2021 as an integral part of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025.²²
31. The regional programme's financial envelope (indicative resources) is \$23.7 million. Of this, \$8.1 million (34.2%) are non-core resources to be mobilized to achieve the programme objectives.²³ To this intent, EECARO developed an integrated resource mobilization and partnership plan and identified key resource mobilization activities for 2022-2025.²⁴ At its highest level, through the regional programme, EECARO intends to support the achievement of the SDGs by contributing to the achievement of universal access to SRH and realization of RR and accelerated implementation of the PoA of the ICPD (strategic plan goal). It does so by accelerating the reduction of
- unmet need for family planning by 2025 (indicative resource needs: \$8.6 million);
 - preventable maternal deaths by 2025 (indicative resource requirements: \$6.5 million); and
 - GBV and harmful practices by 2025 (indicative resource needs: \$6.5 million).
32. The focus of UNFPA regional programmes is on the output level. Hence, the IRRF does not list any indicators for EECARO to track its performance against these three strategic plan outcomes, and no targets have been set.

²⁰ "Global and regional interventions action plans" before the strategic plan 2022-2025.

²¹ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. Annex 4 Global and regional programmes. 18 July 2021.

²² UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme 2022-2025. 19 July 2021.

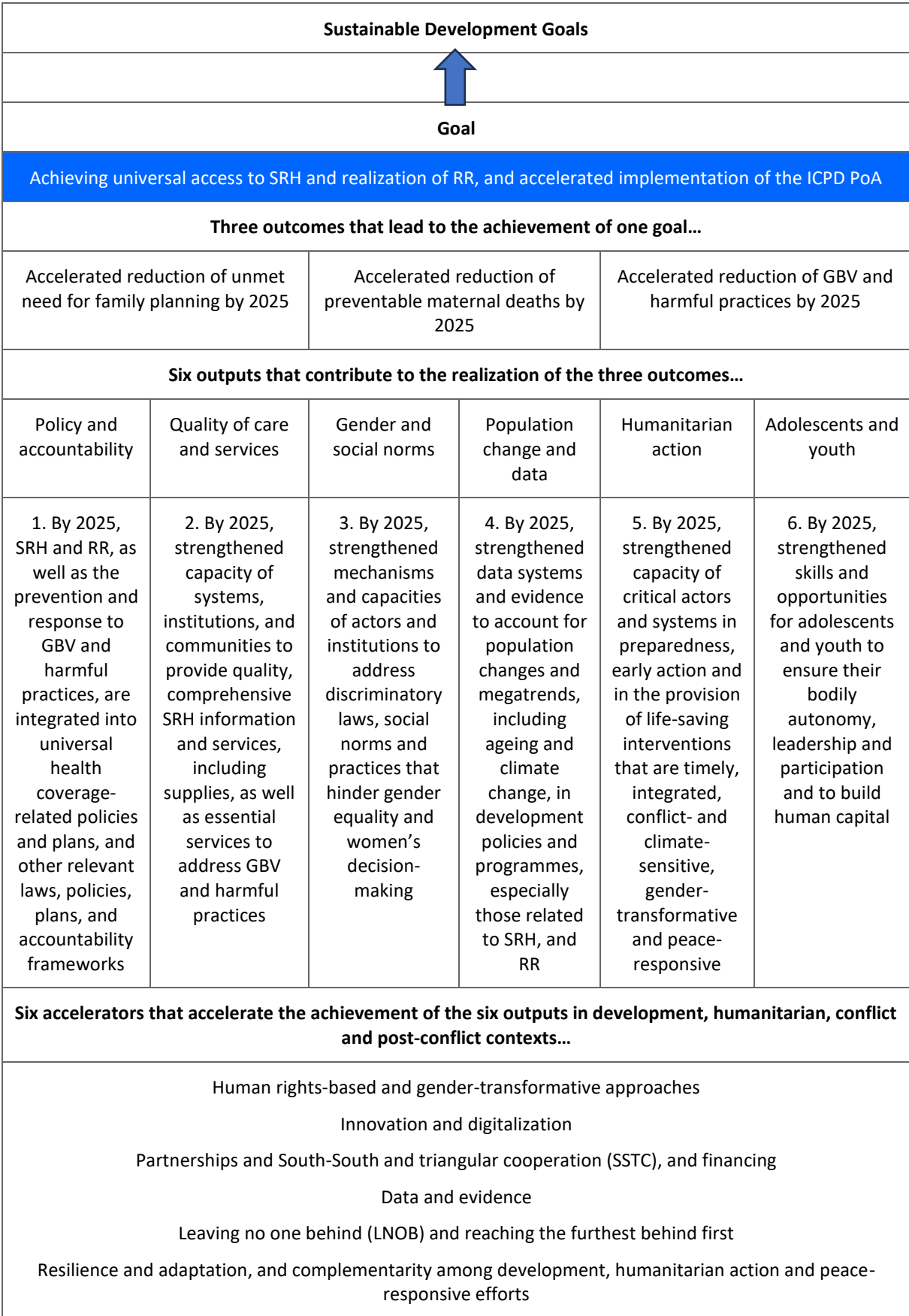
²³ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme 2022-2025. Annex 1. Results and resources framework for the Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme 2022-2025. 19 July 2021. Note: Including resources for achieving the organizational effectiveness and efficiency (OEE) outputs.

²⁴ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme 2022-2025. 19 July 2021.

33. EECARO intends to deliver on all six strategic plan outputs, which represent the most direct results that can be achieved from the interventions carried out by UNFPA (see Figure 5). The EECA regional programme 2022-2025 initially chose not to replicate Output 5 but rather to mainstream humanitarian action - e.g., data needs for humanitarian action under the population change and data output and including young people in humanitarian action under the adolescents and youth output. As part of the MTR of the UNFPA strategic plan in 2023-2024, however, the decision was taken to align with the strategic plan by introducing a separate humanitarian output. Outputs are viewed as interconnected and as contributors to one or more regional programme outcomes and are measured by way of performance indicators and targets:
- The policy and accountability work of EECARO (output 1; indicative resource needs: \$4.0 million) is broad. Performance indicators cover country-level and regional processes and measure EECARO's support for the inclusion of universal health coverage, gender equality, SRH and RR of vulnerable groups (e.g., Roma women and girls), cervical cancer prevention and SRH and GBV in emergencies as well as to promote the participation of and consideration of young people's priorities. EECARO also supports formulating national population policies that address demographic challenges and opportunities.
 - As for the quality of care and services in the region (output 2; indicative resource needs \$3.5 million), EECARO's focus lies on SRH, especially family planning and HIV information and services, through interventions at the regional level and support for programme countries, and with particular attention to excluded and marginalized groups, including women living with disabilities, Roma women and key populations. Performance indicators do not track any work to improve services that address GBV and harmful practices services.
 - Key interventions under output 3 (gender and social norms; indicative resource needs \$5.6 million) support the elaboration of gender-responsive family policies (including in the private sector through family-friendly workspaces that include work culture and addressing harmful gender norms in the workplace), data collection and analysis to study social norms, the promotion of positive masculinities and men and boys' engagement in gender equality, and participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in regional and international forums.
 - Output 4 (population change and data) is the costliest area of work: indicative resource needs amounting to \$6.1 million, of which UNFPA needs to mobilize \$4.0 million. Work in this area is geared towards programme country support for population and housing censuses, civil registration and vital statistics, open population data, national transfer accounts, and population projections.
 - In the humanitarian sphere (output 5), EECARO emphasizes the inclusion of sex and age-disaggregated data and the key principles of the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action²⁵ in national preparedness and response plans; inter-agency emergency coordination; and the Minimum Initial Service Package for SRH in Crisis Situations (MISP) and gender-based violence in emergencies (GBViE) readiness.
 - Lastly, EECARO works at the regional level and supports country-level adolescent and youth stakeholders (output 6; indicative resource needs: \$2.3 million) to use youth indices to promote young people's contributions to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, provide comprehensive sexuality and HIV education in and out of school, and reach out to key young populations.
34. The regional programme does not explicitly discuss using accelerators and applying strategic shifts to enhance performance in achieving the programme outputs. However, scattered references throughout the document suggest that all are relevant to the EECA regional context and programme.

²⁵ <https://www.youthcompact.org/>.

FIGURE 5: THE REGIONAL PROGRAMME SIMPLIFIED THEORY OF CHANGE



Source: RPE Team based on the UNFPA regional programme 2022-2025

3. Findings

3.1 To What Extent Have the Accelerators Supported Enhanced Programming within EECA?

Summary: While all accelerators are relevant to the EECA region, the RPE shows that gender-transformative approaches, population data and evidence, and SSTC and private sector partnerships are programmatic adaptations particularly supportive of scaling up results and achieving longer-term positive impact. The war in Ukraine and the escalated conflict over the Karabakh region since the approval of the strategic plan 2022-2025 have demonstrated the need for UNFPA to invest more in national resilience and adaptation to crises. Organizational units require more support for operationalizing innovation and digitalization and targeting intersectional vulnerabilities.

Finding 1 (Human rights-based and gender transformative approaches): The focus on human rights-based approaches has not significantly shifted during the current strategic plan cycle, being that it has always been an underlying, foundational principle of all UNFPA work in the EECA region, but its application has become more complex. On the other hand, the last few years have seen an increased focus on gender-transformative approaches, which brings opportunities for longer-term positive impact and potential questions around the role and mandate of UNFPA in gender equality.

35. Human rights are not the subject of a specific EECARO strategy or regional programme output. There is no overarching statement regarding using a human rights-based approach (HRBA). Still, references can be found for the different regional programme outputs and work areas - e.g., human rights-based population policies and SRH services.²⁶
36. There is a sense that everything implemented and supported by EECARO promotes a HRBA. Feedback suggests that the HRBA is less of an accelerator than the foundational essence of what UNFPA does. However, it is difficult and being applied within an increasingly hostile environment, particularly around issues of LGBTQI, SRHR and gender equality.²⁷ At the regional level, efforts have been made to address the pushback, such as through the Issue-Based Coalition (IBC) for Gender Equality, jointly organized with UN Women, and the Regional Roadmap for Family Planning, which has an apparent human rights-based approach.²⁸
37. There are examples of a specific and focused HRBA at the country level in the region, supported by the regional office in design and practice. For example, references to promoting human rights as implementation principles in CPDs (for instance, in Serbia)²⁹ and policy briefs for rights-based responses to demographic challenges and issues such as active ageing (for example, in Kazakhstan).³⁰ Across the region, in 2023, the Evaluation of UNFPA Support for Population Dynamics and Data³¹ found that UNFPA is widely recognised for integrating a HRBA into population dynamics and data. Further evidence reveals that the UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme

²⁶ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025 (DP/FPA/2021/8). Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme (2022-2025). 2021.

²⁷ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

²⁸ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs and UN agency regional KIIs.

²⁹ Serbia country study.

³⁰ Kazakhstan country study,

³¹ UNFPA. Evaluation of UNFPA Support to Population Dynamics and Data. 2023.

for Eastern Europe and Central Asia is entirely based on rights-based approaches to addressing demographic challenges.^{32,33,34}

38. EECARO has proactively supported gender-transformative approaches. The EECA regional programme contributes to Output 3 of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 on gender and social norms: “By 2025, strengthened mechanisms and capacities of actors and institutions to address discriminatory gender and social norms to advance gender equality and women’s decision-making”.³⁵ Targeted work under this particular output is on 1) gender-responsive family policies; 2) engaging boys and men in gender equality and spearheading positive masculinities; 3) social norms surveys and analyses; and 4) participation of CSOs in regional and international forums.³⁶ More generally, the regional programme commits UNFPA to addressing and changing the “deeper societal, political, economic and cultural norms and attitudes that act as barriers to the achievement of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and reproductive rights (RR) for all”,³⁷ which can be understood as applying a gender-transformative approach.
39. Key informants have reported that the cross-cutting gender-transformative approach accelerator is very relevant to the EECA region. It has been useful in taking gender mainstreaming to a more ambitious level, and this is very intricately linked to HRBA in terms of a focus on the human rights of women and girls.³⁸
40. Progress has been made across the region with consistent support from EECARO, in the absence of corporate guidance. This has included developing, piloting, and rolling out a methodology for systematically applying a gender-transformative approach and addressing social and gender norms at the country level, such as within the Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan country programmes.³⁹ For example, in Uzbekistan, an increasingly conducive context for progress towards gender equality since the 2016 elections has opened a window of opportunity to leverage government will and motivation for genuine gender-transformative action. UNFPA Uzbekistan, with solid support from EECARO, has effectively exploited this window by supporting legislation and then the implementation of that legislation. This included a workshop in Tashkent on transformative approaches at the end of 2022 and a follow-up workshop in 2023. The 2023 workshop coincided with the MTR of the Uzbekistan CPD, which provided the opportunity to review the CPD from a gender-transformative lens and revise it to align with the strategic plan 2022-2025.⁴⁰ From these workshops, the Uzbekistan country office has engaged in innovative, transformative programming, including strategies such as working with religious leaders, introducing gender-responsive family policies, and increasing male engagement.
41. More broadly across the region, key informants highlight EECARO support for UNFPA country offices through two specific regional/multi-country programmes: the Gender-Transformative Family Policy (“Expanding Choices through Family-Friendly Policies”) and EU4Gender Equality.⁴¹ In addition, country offices have been supported through a strategy and regional resource package for implementing a multisectoral approach to GBV. In consultation with country offices, EECARO

³² <https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/demographic-resilience-programme#:~:text=UNFPA's%20Demographic%20Resilience%20programme%20assists,public%20support%20to%20manage%20them.>

³³ UNFPA EECA regional documents and publications on demographic resilience.

³⁴ See EQ2.1 on low fertility and ageing as a megatrend for more details.

³⁵ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025 (DP/FPA/2021/8). Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme (2022-2025). 2021.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ EECARO study and multiple country studies.

³⁹ Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan country studies.

⁴⁰ UNFPA KIIs.

⁴¹ <https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/eu-4-gender-equality-programme>

also developed a regional strategy for engaging men and boys and promoting positive masculinities.⁴²

42. Despite progress, implementing a gender-transformative approach has not been without challenges, and its internalization has yet to be fully achieved. Challenges include⁴³:
- the fact that the concept is complex and requires specific localization to each context - gender norms being extremely context-specific;
 - that immediate results are not seen: gender-transformative action requires a longer-term commitment;
 - an inconsistent and superficial understanding of the gender-transformative approach and how it differs from gender mainstreaming across UNFPA management and staff, despite consistent training support from the regional office and some support from UNFPA HQ;
 - confusion within UNFPA, or at least a lack of consistent understanding, of what is meant by gender norms as opposed to social norms;
 - a general regional pushback on both human rights and gender equality across EECA; and
 - the risk that as UNFPA increases gender-transformative programming, this naturally elevates programming to a place where elements of mandates for UNFPA and UN Women will increasingly overlap.
43. The Evaluation of UNFPA Support to Population Dynamics and Data found that, despite different efforts to boost a gender-transformative approach in population and development work across the region, UNFPA faced persistent external and internal challenges at the conceptual, strategic, political and operational levels to develop and implement engendered population dynamics work thoroughly.⁴⁴

Finding 2 (Innovation and digitalization): Piggybacking on a general trend towards digitalization in the EECA region, UNFPA has continued to seek and apply digital solutions to facilitate data work and improve the provision of and women and young people’s access to SRH and GBV information and services, thus extending the organization’s programmatic coverage. However, the accelerator „innovation and digitalization“ was introduced with insufficient implementation guidance and organizational backup. Digitalization carries the risk of exacerbating marginalization and vulnerabilities.

44. The accelerator “innovation and digitalization” is relevant to UNFPA programming in the EECA region.⁴⁵ Evidence reveals collaborative efforts of EECARO and UNFPA country offices to innovate and use digital means to achieve results, and good examples exist.⁴⁶ However, innovation and digitalization are not novel concepts for UNFPA in the region.⁴⁷ Key informants are not entirely clear about the shift in corporate expectations regarding attempting to accelerate the achievement of transformative results by 2030 through innovation and digitalization. There is no standard or consistent idea of what it means.⁴⁸ Moreover, a corporate environment of low risk-taking and pressure to meet targets under often difficult circumstances has somewhat hampered

⁴² RO 2023 annual report.

⁴³ EECARO and multiple country studies.

⁴⁴ UNFPA. Evaluation of UNFPA Support to Population Dynamics and Data. Volume 3. 2023.

⁴⁵ EECARO and country studies.

⁴⁶ EECARO and country studies. Strategic plan mid-term review data indicates that 31% of EECA country offices have implemented innovation and digitalization to boost programme interventions, versus 13% globally. Source: PPT EECA MTR Summary.

motivation to explore, experiment, and, if necessary, fail.⁴⁹ In addition, EECARO has no innovation position to support regional office staff and country office innovation focal points.⁵⁰

45. Examples suggest that UNFPA in EECA has broadly understood the innovation and digitalization accelerator as applying digital solutions. Digitalization has advanced data collection and management, capacity building, and the provision of and access to SRH and GBV information and services.⁵¹ For example:
- All UNFPA-supported censuses conducted during the 2020 round, apart from Azerbaijan, were digitalized, some for the first time.
 - UNFPA developed a monitoring dashboard (Planning and Progress Tracking Tool) for operationalizing the Roadmap for Ending the Unmet Need for Family Planning in Eastern Europe and Central Asia by 2030.
 - New UNFPA virtual SRHR training courses - first and foremost ANSER and ViC - have targeted national stakeholders across the region.
 - UNFPA has supported strengthening health systems by introducing telemedicine in cervical cancer screening and advice.
 - Women and girls have accessed crucial SRH/GBV information and assistance through mobile apps (e.g., Safe YOU, amma and Flo); online platforms (e.g., Aurora and “No Trivia in Relations” in Uzbekistan); telegram channels (e.g., “Free from Violence” in Ukraine), podcasts (e.g., “Take Care of Me” in Serbia); and digital literacy training.
46. The COVID-19 pandemic and a general trend towards digitalization in the region's countries have facilitated the operationalization of the innovation and digitalization accelerator, including in the context of EU accession.⁵² Innovation and digitalization have also benefited from private sector interest and engagement - e.g., mobile apps.⁵³ Internally, the accelerator has profited from encouraging UNFPA country office managers and open-minded staff.⁵⁴
47. The UNFPA Strategic Investment Facility (SIF) is potentially a helpful instrument for accessing funding for innovative projects. For instance, the North Macedonia country office was awarded funding to develop a mobile application for CSE for adolescents and youth with autism spectrum disorder. The Serbia country office has applied for funding to improve the digitalization of maternity wards.
48. Regarding benefits and risks, virtual means have broadened UNFPA's outreach to national stakeholders in a context where the organization's core and non-core funds are scarce.⁵⁵ It has allowed UNFPA to conduct multi-country/sub-regional activities such as ANSER and ViC, thus harmonizing knowledge and enhancing knowledge sharing among stakeholders across the region and potentially facilitating SSTC.⁵⁶ Innovation and digitalization, including in the context of strengthening health systems, have also permitted UNFPA and partners to extend and improve services for women and girls, including in remote areas of EECA countries.⁵⁷ However, telemedicine is complex and requires financial means and technical knowledge that often exceeds the capacities

⁴⁹ Armenia and Turkmenistan country studies.

⁵⁰ EECARO. In comparison: ASRO has a Programme Specialist Innovation and a Young Innovator Specialist; APRO has an Innovation Specialist and a Private Sector and Innovative Financing Specialist; ESARO has an Innovation Specialist and an Innovation & Knowledge Management Analyst; and WCARO has an Innovation Specialist.

⁵¹ EECARO and country studies.

⁵² EECARO and country studies.

⁵³ EECARO study.

⁵⁴ Albania country study.

⁵⁵ EECARO study.

⁵⁶ EECARO and Albania, Armenia, Belarus, B&H, Kazakhstan, Moldova, North Macedonia & Serbia country studies.

⁵⁷ EECARO and Moldova & Turkmenistan country studies.

of UNFPA and governments.⁵⁸ Furthermore, attention must be paid to how digitalization links to the LNOB principle, particularly when those without access to digital platforms risk becoming among the most left-behind groups.⁵⁹

49. Innovation and digitalization apply not only to programmes but can also be understood to apply to UNFPA business operations. However, the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 is unclear, and key informants did not discuss it in great depth.

Finding 3 (Partnership and SSTC)⁶⁰: In addition to a commitment to extending and diversifying partnerships in general, UNFPA is firmly using partnerships with the corporate sector and SSTC to raise awareness and interest and scale up results in the EECA region.

50. Partnerships and coordination is an established UNFPA mode of engagement that long pre-dates the strategic plan 2022-2025. Evidence confirms a high level of commitment within EECARO and the UNFPA country offices in the region to coordinating and partnering with a range of actors in development and humanitarian settings.⁶¹ While the commitment is there, UNFPA has faced challenges:

- Across the region, the small size of UNFPA offices and limited time availability for reaching out to and interacting with potential partners have hampered partnership building.⁶²
- Mobilizing donors other than the Russian Federation, on which UNFPA has greatly relied in the past, has been difficult because donors are phasing out their assistance, not prioritizing SRH, or - in the case of Belarus - have withdrawn entirely for political reasons.⁶³
- NGOs and CSOs are suffering from a shrinking civil society space.⁶⁴
- Competition among United Nations agencies and with NGOs for visibility and limited funds has created inefficiencies.⁶⁵

51. The MTR of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 revealed that 75% of UNFPA country offices in the EECA region have forged partnerships with the private sector (as opposed to 56% globally).⁶⁶ Intensified collaboration between UNFPA and the corporate sector for public outreach and programme delivery in EECA is indeed notable.⁶⁷ Evidence collection revealed several good examples from across the region and at the individual country level. A prominent example of accelerating results through engagement with the corporate sector is the multi-country programme “Expanding Choices: Gender-Responsive Family Policies for the Private Sector”, funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), which is led by EECARO and implemented by EECARO and the participating country offices.⁶⁸ Key informants also frequently mentioned the Regional Alliance for Cervical Cancer, launched by EECARO in October 2021, as a valuable platform for bringing together private sector companies (e.g., Roche), policymakers, medical experts and international organizations.⁶⁹ At the individual country level, UNFPA has partnered with ICT companies to increase the use of digital means to benefit UNFPA’s outreach and programme

⁵⁸ Moldova country study.

⁵⁹ EECARO and Albania country studies.

⁶⁰ Financing is discussed under funding-to-financing.

⁶¹ EECARO and country studies.

⁶² EECARO and Albania and Uzbekistan country studies.

⁶³ EECARO and Belarus country studies.

⁶⁴ EECARO and Belarus country studies.

⁶⁵ Moldova and North Macedonia country studies.

⁶⁶ PPT EECA MTR Summary.

⁶⁷ EECARO and Albania, Belarus, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia and Tajikistan country studies.

⁶⁸ EECARO and Albania, Belarus, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), Moldova, North Macedonia and Serbia country studies.

⁶⁹ EECARO and Albania, Kazakhstan, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia and Tajikistan country studies.

delivery⁷⁰ - e.g., for implementing censuses and strengthening the digital literacy of older persons. Individual country offices have joined hands with private foundations such as the Louis Dreyfus Foundation LDC in Albania to tackle GBSS and with LDS Charities to address the urgent needs of maternal and infant health services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

52. UNFPA is a keen member of the regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) and United Nations country teams within the framework of the reform of the United Nations development system (UNDS) and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs). In 2022, the Evaluation of the UNFPA Engagement in the Reform of the United Nations Development System found that UNFPA had provided significant support to key elements of the UNDS reform in all regions by engaging in regional collaborative platforms (RCPs) and providing substantive support for issue-based coalitions (IBCs) and peer support groups (PSGs), thus providing UNFPA with an opportunity to position the ICPD PoA better. Specifically, the evaluation highlights the gender equality IBC in EECA, co-chaired by UNFPA with UN Women, as a good practice to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Similarly, the Evaluation of UNFPA Support for Population Dynamics and Data in 2023 found that EECARO's partnerships with other United Nations agencies for accelerating population and development issues were relatively strong, although success in integrating population dynamics, including demographic resilience and the demographic dividend, in United Nations system-wide planning processes had been limited.
53. Evidence gathered at the country level indicates that UNFPA country offices in EECA are active participants in UN joint planning, inter-agency coordination mechanisms, and joint programme implementation.⁷¹ A prominent example of collaboration across the region is the multi-country EU4 Gender Equality Joint Programme with UN Women.⁷² Recent country-level examples include the mandatory inclusion of "Healthy Lifestyle Club" in the curriculum for 5th and 7th-grade students in public schools in Armenia, which UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO, and WFP supported.⁷³ As a humanitarian actor, UNFPA also contributes to humanitarian teams (e.g., related to COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine) and is the lead agency/co-chair for GBV coordination (in line with its global area of responsibility within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)).⁷⁴
54. The level of UNFPA-facilitated SSTC within the EECA region is remarkable.⁷⁵ This can also be attributed to a certain competition among governments and an increasing degree of interest in mutual knowledge sharing and common learning adapted to the regional/sub-regional contexts.⁷⁶ On the other hand, SSTC has been hampered by political tensions and conflicts.⁷⁷ EECARO-facilitated regional/multi-country frameworks, programmes, and mechanisms, such as the Russia-funded CISPop project, the Regional Alliance for Cervical Cancer, and the UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, are particularly valuable platforms for SSTC.

Finding 4 (Data and evidence): Data, and particularly population data, has increasingly become a more important focus for UNFPA in EECA, with very strong regional support for national census and other population data processes. In many respects, and linked to the demographic resilience work, this goes beyond and is more critical in the region than the transformative results in terms of the support that governments seek.

⁷⁰ EECARO and Serbia country studies.

⁷¹ EECARO and Belarus, North Macedonia and Serbia country studies.

⁷² Armenia, Belarus and Moldova country studies.

⁷³ Armenia country study; <https://armenia.unfpa.org/en/HealthyLifestyle>.

⁷⁴ Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine country studies.

⁷⁵ EECARO and Albania, Moldova, North Macedonia Serbia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan country studies.

⁷⁶ EECARO and Turkmenistan country studies.

⁷⁷ EECARO and Armenia and Belarus country studies.

55. The EECA regional programme stresses population-based data and evidence to support the production of demographic intelligence and to track key indicators related to the SDGs and the ICPD.⁷⁸ This is aligned with priorities within the region - predominantly for Eastern Europe and the Balkans, but increasingly for Central Asia as well: “The Eastern Europe, Western Balkans and Caucasus subregions are in the final stages of a demographic transition, with low fertility and ageing as key characteristics. The Central Asian countries are characterized by proportionally higher percentages of young people.”⁷⁹
56. Within EECARO, there is a clear understanding of the difference between data and population dynamics and the need to ensure this is consistently recognized across the organization.⁸⁰ The regional programme confirms support for major statistical data-collection operations such as population censuses and international surveys, as well as for administrative data. It promotes the principle of “open data” and anticipates greater use of digital innovations.⁸¹ This support is relevant to the significant data gaps across many countries within the EECA region and is a unique added value of UNFPA.⁸²
57. Data is a significant gap in many countries in the region, and UNFPA support is beginning to address such gaps in a manner that is broader than the transformative results. Examples include contributing through research and reports on specific issues, particularly fertility and demographic issues (such as in Uzbekistan),⁸³ older women (such as the report produced by Serbia covering the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine)⁸⁴, male engagement (such as in Kazakhstan)⁸⁵ and supporting National Transfer Accounts (such as in Moldova and Serbia).⁸⁶ Across the Western Balkans (including Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), North Macedonia and Serbia), UNFPA participates in a joint programme funded by the Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund that focuses on evidence-based migration policy planning and discourse.⁸⁷ Indeed, many respondents highlighted that a future fourth transformative result, being zero people left uncounated, would be useful for the region.⁸⁸ While this does not speak entirely to pure population dynamics, the data necessary for ensuring zero people are left uncounated are population datasets, and this consideration would bring the population data back into the UNFPA strategic plan's current goal-orientated zero language.
58. A significant proportion of the support in data and evidence has been provided through the CISPop programme - “Better Data for Better Policies”.⁸⁹ This is a regional UNFPA programme funded by the Russian Federation to strengthen population data collection, analysis and utilization for evidence-based policy-making in nine countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region.⁹⁰ The EECARO 2023 annual report highlights progress thanks to CISPop, particularly in census work. The support of the CISPop programme is effective at the country level. It has provided

⁷⁸ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025 (DP/FPA/2021/8). Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme (2022-2025). 2021.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ EECARO study.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² EECARO study.

⁸³ Uzbekistan country study.

⁸⁴ Serbia country study.

⁸⁵ Kazakhstan country study

⁸⁶ Moldova and Serbia country studies.

⁸⁷ CPD MKD; CO KIIs. <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/mptf>; <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/fund-action-north-macedonia>.

⁸⁸ Regional and country level KIIs.

⁸⁹

<https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/cispop#:~:text=CISPop%3A%20Better%20Data%20for%20Better%20Policies&text=The%20three%2Dyear%20programme%20was,in%20policy%20development%20and%20planning>.

⁹⁰ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan country studies.

support in conducting censuses, including SSTC (such as in Tajikistan, Belarus, and Uzbekistan), population projections (such as in Uzbekistan), and geographic information systems (such as in Belarus).⁹¹ However, it is noted that there have been challenges regarding CISPop, with sanctions related to Russia affecting several country offices in the region regarding its implementation.⁹²

59. The 2023 Evaluation of UNFPA Support for Population Dynamics and Data found that EECARO had effectively supported capacity strengthening and enabled the timely collection of relevant quality disaggregated population data in different countries throughout the region, with a stronger emphasis on CIS countries since the introduction of the CISPop project.
60. Data and evidence are not concepts restricted to only population data. For EECARO, data underpins everything. For gender-transformative action, human rights-based approaches, LNOB, partnerships, and working across the nexus, data is required to make evidence-based decisions for UNFPA and the whole United Nations system and governments, society, and communities at all levels.⁹³ One challenge highlighted by key informants is that UNFPA does not have its own data set, such as the UNICEF multiple cluster indicator survey (MICS). EECARO has proposed this to UNFPA HQ, but it has not yet been seriously considered. It is recognized that it would be a huge and long-term commitment. Still, at the same time, as a leading United Nations data agency, a signatory survey on demographic trends would be worthy of serious consideration, but this would have to be a global initiative, not a regional one.⁹⁴
61. Despite issues with the openness of data (and noting that UNFPA support for ODIN scores contributes to addressing this), another challenge is that while there are many other data sets (of varying quality), there are not enough statisticians within EECARO, at country level, or even at UNFPA HQ to provide the economical, return-on-investment and value-added evidence-based case studies that are required, especially for the funding to financing agenda, and for all of UNFPA's work.⁹⁵
62. Further gaps in data are linked to humanitarian crises and working across the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus, specifically meaningfully linking population data to migration and forced displacement caused by humanitarian situations. For instance, in Ukraine, UNFPA has been successful with regard to humanitarian data, providing the 2023 Ukraine Common Operational Dataset on Population Statistics (COD-PS),⁹⁶ which supports the entire humanitarian response and was reportedly praised by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) in Ukraine as one of the most credible baseline datasets for the response alongside the IOM population tracker.⁹⁷ However, EECARO was not involved in addressing this important and critical data gap, and overall, this is an area where EECARO recognises that "the role of UNFPA needs to be strengthened".⁹⁸
63. Other country-level key informants highlighted a lack of support for integrating disaster preparedness and climate change data, evidence, and forecasting into the overall data support. This is considered an enormous opportunity, but one that is currently being missed as the expertise does not exist at the country or regional office levels. Generally, there is considered to be a disconnect at the regional level between data and humanitarian preparedness and response.⁹⁹

⁹¹ Tajikistan, Belarus and Uzbekistan country studies.

⁹² EECARO study.

⁹³ EECARO study,

⁹⁴ Regional UNFPA KIIs.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ <https://data.humdata.org/dashboards/cod?>

⁹⁷ Ukraine country study.

⁹⁸ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025 (DP/FPA/2021/8). Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme (2022-2025). 2021.

⁹⁹ UNFPA KIIs at different country levels.

Finding 5 (Leaving no one behind and “reaching the furthest behind”): EECARO is very strong at promoting and supporting the concepts of LNOB and reaching the furthest behind across all countries in the region. This has not necessarily been driven by the current strategic plan but has always been a focus in a MIC region where support to governments is around reaching the most marginalized populations. At the country level, there is a focus on people with disabilities and some evidence of work across other left-behind groups, such as Roma. However, a more nuanced understanding of intersectional vulnerabilities is often lacking.

64. EECARO has systematically prioritized LNOB across the regional programme, which explicitly highlights that to achieve country-level results, the regional office will need to support country efforts to give greater priority to those left furthest behind if the transformative results are to be achieved. Among other things, the regional programme highlights partnering with CSOs, with particular attention given to those led by marginalized groups.¹⁰⁰
65. Key informants at the country and regional levels confirm that EECARO has systematically promoted the LNOB principle/accelerator - e.g., in youth and GBV programming, support for refugees, data and analytics, demographic resilience, and communications.¹⁰¹ The regional office piloted the global LNOB toolkit in 2023 in Albania and provided feedback to UNFPA HQ, although this has not been further developed.¹⁰²
66. The regional office clearly understands the strong linkage between LNOB and data, which indicates who is most left behind. Key informants report that while this is the use of population data at the individual level and not population dynamics at the societal level (e.g., understanding ageing or shrinking populations, which is what demographic resilience addresses), it is still critical data.¹⁰³
67. The Evaluation of UNFPA Support for Population Dynamics and Data found that the common thread through all regional frameworks for demographic resilience is the concept of LNOB and the integration of human rights. However, regarding the EECA region, it found that UNFPA had experienced challenges boosting LNOB despite increased efforts to address marginalized groups. It suggested that there was room for a strengthened, systematic cross-cutting approach. Two key challenges exist:
 - Firstly, there is the challenge of political sensitivities around reaching the furthest behind. There are clear sensitivities with some of the key marginalized populations made vulnerable because of SRHR and gender factors, such as LGBTQI persons, sex workers, people living with HIV, men who have sex with men (MSM). Also in the region, there are political sensitivities around targeting Roma populations, who are also identified as a left-behind group.¹⁰⁴
 - The second key challenge concerns data and the insufficient availability of disaggregated local-level data. This is a regional challenge, with evidence of the implications across different country contexts.¹⁰⁵
68. There has been a pronounced regional focus on disability inclusion compared to targeting other left-behind groups at the country level, with evidence of some systematic EECARO support for disability inclusion, particularly compared to support for other LNOB groups, which is more sporadic and ad hoc.¹⁰⁶ At the country level, there is a greater focus on PwD and disability inclusion in SRH and GBV services and less of a focus on:

¹⁰⁰ EECARO study,

¹⁰¹ EECARO and multiple country studies.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ EECARO study.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ All country studies.

- Population Situation Analyses (PSAs), which can provide robust data on precisely those that are left behind, including a more nuanced understanding of intersectional vulnerabilities, and is information that multiple actors can use to design inclusive programmes;
 - localized planning specifically to reach those furthest behind, rather than the more clunky approach to identifying traditional LNOB groups and focusing on one of the least controversial to reach, being PwD; and
 - data-driven arguments for the cost analysis and economic, return-on-investment arguments for how reaching those left furthest behind is socially beneficial.¹⁰⁷
69. Examples of this primary focus on disability inclusion are from across Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Central Asia. In Central Asia, regional office support has been provided through the Central Asian model for standard operating procedures that integrate disability inclusion criteria (such as in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Belarus).¹⁰⁸ In Eastern Europe and the Balkans, examples also focus on disability inclusion (such as in Armenia, Moldova and North Macedonia).¹⁰⁹ Regarding humanitarian preparedness and response, EECARO organized training on using the UNFPA Disability Inclusion Strategies to collect sex, age and disability-disaggregated data to ensure that the needs of young people and women and girls with disabilities are accounted for.¹¹⁰
70. While there is clear evidence of work on disability inclusion at the country level within the EECA region, there is less consistent evidence of comprehensive and coherent regional support. There are also only disparate and sporadic examples of regional support for reaching other left-behind groups. Examples include the desire to understand and identify most left-behind groups, above and beyond persons with disabilities (such as within the Tajikistan CPD or within the Bosnia and Herzegovina PSA). Other population groups identified across the region include Roma, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), migrants, rural populations, older women, and those living in poverty.¹¹¹
71. In addition to the integration of disability inclusion and reaching other left-behind population groups through UNFPA programming, there is one other aspect of LNOB that is evident within UNFPA country offices in the EECA region, and that is the recruitment of personnel from left-behind groups. Uzbekistan currently has a UNV specialist on disability inclusion who is a person with a disability, and various other offices have employed persons with disabilities and Roma staff (e.g., North Macedonia and Belarus). These initiatives have been taken by UNFPA country offices, not as a part of a regional promotion or strategy, and so far, have been limited to employing persons from left behind groups specifically to work on inclusion of left behind groups, rather than more broadly.¹¹² While any strategy would need to carefully consider the requirements for increased inclusion within staffing, such as adjustments for physical disabilities, there is a sense that this is the way forward and an opportunity to operationalize a leading role within the LNOB agenda meaningfully.¹¹³
72. In addition, there is a strong sense that a more robust cost-benefit analysis and return-on-investment analysis for a higher cost-per-head of reaching left-behind groups would be useful and to undertake this as much as possible while remaining faithful to economic principles. While understanding that return on investment cases with absolute numbers cannot be developed in an ever-changing environment, less specific cost-benefit analyses based on internal learning could be useful for advocacy and resource mobilisation. At the very least, a solid economic argument for

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Belarus country studies.

¹⁰⁹ Armenia, Moldova and North Macedonia country studies.

¹¹⁰ EECARO 2023 annual report.

¹¹¹ All country studies.

¹¹² Bosnia and Herzegovina country study,

¹¹³ EECARO and multiple country studies.

reaching those most left behind to complement a human rights argument would be useful, and at the country level, there is a strong sense this is lacking.¹¹⁴

Finding 6 (Resilience and adaptation, and complementarity among development, humanitarian and peace-responsive efforts): MISP has traditionally been a strong feature of UNFPA programming in EECA. However, recent events, especially in Ukraine and Armenia, have raised awareness and demonstrated the need for and the potential return on investments in more comprehensive preparedness programming. Relatively strong national systems in Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia have facilitated a smooth transition from humanitarian action to recovery and longer-term development cooperation, coupled with donor willingness to utilize humanitarian funds for strengthening systems.

73. Since 2014, when UNFPA conducted the first MISP readiness assessment, EECARO and UNFPA country offices have engaged in and supported MISP training and integration in national frameworks, both in preparation for humanitarian situations and during crises.¹¹⁵ EECA is the only region where UNFPA has rolled out three regional MISP readiness assessments.¹¹⁶ However, there is a recognition that support for improved readiness to implement the MISP could be improved. All UNFPA country offices that completed MISP readiness assessments in 2021 received support from EECARO.¹¹⁷ However, support for enhanced readiness to implement the MISP could be further improved. Eighty per cent of country offices that participated in a survey conducted as part of the MTR of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 were satisfied with the support received, and 11% were somewhat satisfied.¹¹⁸ In particular, advisory support for implementing recommendations from the 2021 MISP Readiness Assessment and the exchange of good practices was considered weak. Looking ahead, 100% of survey respondents planned to work on the MISP, of which 81% anticipated a need for support from EECARO.¹¹⁹

74. Building capacities in GBV preparedness (GBV in emergencies) is also part of UNFPA's mandate. However, despite the existence of UNFPA minimum standards for prevention and response to GBV in emergencies¹²⁰, planning and implementation of support in this area appears less institutionalized and structured in the EECA region (in 2024, EECARO conducted a first regional GBViE workshop). In instances, a lack of awareness among government stakeholders about the specific risks in emergencies such as conflict-related sexual violence and human trafficking has delayed effective prevention.¹²¹

75. While some activities have been implemented, data and analytics (population and non-population data) for emergency preparedness, recovery and response have not stood out as an area where UNFPA is leaving a mark. The Evaluation of UNFPA Support for Population Dynamics and Data in 2023 revealed mixed responses within EECARO as to the actual achievements of UNFPA and the role/mandate of UNFPA with regard to population data in humanitarian settings - e.g., Common Operational Datasets (COD). EECARO has trained a range of UNFPA country offices to use the Global Compact on Young People in Humanitarian Action and UNFPA Disability Inclusion Strategies to collect sex, age and disability-disaggregated data to ensure the needs of young people and

¹¹⁴ Multiple country-level UNFPA KIIs.

¹¹⁵ Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Moldova, North Macedonia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan country studies.

¹¹⁶ EECARO feedback on humanitarian action deep dive.

¹¹⁷ Feedback from EECARO on draft deep dive.

¹¹⁸ 56% of respondents confirmed having received support from EECARO in the form of MISP readiness assessments, financial resources, training and online sessions, technical briefs and evidence-based factsheets.

¹¹⁹ PPT EECA MTR Survey Findings.

¹²⁰ <https://www.unfpa.org/featured-publication/gbvi-standards>.

¹²¹ EECARO study.

women and girls with disabilities are accounted for in preparedness and planning¹²², but the effective use of these skills for informing national preparedness and response plans is unknown.

76. Armenia has been highlighted as an outstanding example of pro-active preparedness planning, including with EECARO support. Following the second war in the disputed Karabakh region and the surrounding occupied territories in 2020, the UNFPA CPD 2021-2025 for Armenia stated that the country was at high risk of natural and technogenic disasters, combined with an unstable security situation in the region. It suggested that updating emergency response and preparedness plans and integrating capacities for rapid assessments in case of emergencies, along with MISP, would help to better manage crisis situations. In September 2023, the Karabakh region witnessed further escalations, and Armenia experienced an immense influx of over 100,000 refugees in five days. Thanks to considerable upfront investments in preparedness and capacity building, including the development of information materials, prepositioning of reproductive health and dignity kits, MISP training for health and rescue workers in emergency-prone areas of the country and strengthening of referral pathways, UNFPA and its partners were ready and among the first on the ground, which was also very beneficial for the organization's reputation in the country.¹²³
77. Overall, key informant interviews suggest that UNFPA support for national emergency preparedness has been affected by a corporate prioritization of response to humanitarian crises over anticipating (including the effects of megatrends such as climate change) and strengthening the preparedness of EECA countries.¹²⁴ Despite the inclusion of "vulnerability to risks" as part of the RAS formula¹²⁵, UNFPA country offices in EECA have lacked sufficient core resources to invest in resilience as part of their development cooperation. Already limited donor funding for the region has not been forthcoming for preparedness planning.
78. Developments in the region over recent years and the increasing instability have enhanced awareness of the importance of preparedness at the regional and country levels for larger-scale crises and humanitarian responses.¹²⁶ As a result, the EECA regional programme 2022-2025 was modified to include a separate output 5 "By 2025, strengthened capacity of critical actors and systems in preparedness, early action and in the provision of life-saving interventions that are timely, integrated, conflict and climate-sensitive, gender-transformative and peace-responsive".
79. The EECA region provides good examples of working across the humanitarian-development nexus - especially in Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia.¹²⁷ This is thanks to relatively solid national systems that have allowed UNFPA to link its humanitarian action to systems strengthening and national preparedness. It is also due to the flexibility of some donors in allowing UNFPA to use humanitarian funds for systems strengthening - although the short-term nature of humanitarian funding remains a limitation. In all three programme countries, UNFPA humanitarian action has benefited from relatively strong national counterparts. Instead of setting up parallel and short-term structures and mechanisms, it has built on national systems to respond to the needs of refugees/internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities alike. Simultaneously, thanks to some of its donors' flexibility, UNFPA has utilised humanitarian funding to further strengthen public services, including for future emergencies.
80. For instance, as part of its humanitarian response to the war in the Ukraine, UNFPA has supported the establishment of gender-responsive VONA (career) hubs and women-friendly spaces that later should be integrated into the Ukrainian national system for preventing and responding to GBV.

¹²² EECARO 2022 and 2023 annual reports. Albania, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine.

¹²³ Armenia country study. The country office had also mobilized USD 500,000 from the UNFPA Emergency Fund.

¹²⁴ EECARO and country studies.

¹²⁵ EECARO and Ukraine country studies; UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 Annex 3 Business Model.

¹²⁶ EECARO and country studies.

¹²⁷ EECARO and Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine country studies.

UNFPA has also trained healthcare professionals across Ukraine to provide quality and life-saving reproductive health services.¹²⁸ In Moldova, UNFPA has provided technical capacity building for the health and social sectors; mobile safe spaces introduced as part of the refugee response have been institutionalized; and newly created colposcopy centres are providing important services.¹²⁹

3.2 To What Extent Have Strategic Shifts Supported Enhanced Programming within EECA?

Summary: The most prominent shifts in the EECA region are UNFPA's strategic positioning in the area of demographic intelligence and resilience in response to broad-based government concerns related to population changes with potential implications for women's rights and as a humanitarian actor in response to the war in Ukraine and other crises such as the persisting conflict surrounding the Karabakh region. In terms of other megatrends, UNFPA has also taken critical first steps to integrate the effects of GBV in the digital space into its programming. Still, there is room for improving migration and climate change-related considerations. Given these and other dominant needs in SRHR (e.g., cervical cancer and HIV prevention), a narrow focus on achieving the transformative results has not appeared appropriate. Consulted UNFPA staff in EECA do not fully support the shift from funding to financing, given a continued need for UNFPA resource mobilization, and this strategic shift has not been effectively launched across the region.

Finding 7 (Low fertility and ageing, as well as other megatrends): The UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia has gone from strength to strength and is considered across several countries to be the most relevant support UNFPA can be giving within the EECA context. More so than work directly connected to the transformative results, although demographic resilience can be seen as an entry point to sustaining and achieving the transformative results and vice-versa. Other megatrends, particularly migration and climate change, are not as well integrated in UNFPA programming as they could be, and this is a future opportunity.

81. Support for demographic resilience has been a significant success in a region with diverse demographic trends. UNFPA has emerged as a clear leader in demographic intelligence and support to countries, which aligns with one of the highest priorities for many governments in the region. However, the traction that has been gained has not yet led to significant policy commitments across the region, although interventions such as supporting policies for active ageing and gender-responsive workplaces are relevant activities to mitigate the impact of ageing societies, and there has been significant regional success here.¹³⁰
82. The 2023 Evaluation of UNFPA Support for Population Dynamics and Data found that the UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia breathed new life into the UNFPA mandate for population and data. The evaluation found that this area of UNFPA work had reduced priority globally, in contrast to the needs of increasingly MIC regions. Therefore, the Demographic Resilience Programme was a way of reviving population data support in a region where this was particularly relevant. Even more nuanced than this and of continuous relevance to date, the evaluation found that:
 - the emergence of the demographic resilience paradigm was demonstrating promise as a powerful, comprehensive and rights-based framework for influencing national policies particularly relevant to a context of ageing and population decline;

¹²⁸ EECARO and Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine country studies.

¹²⁹ Moldova country study.

¹³⁰ EECARO study.

- despite some achievements, UNFPA's approach to migration, which is a clear challenge in the region and linked to population issues, was perceived as inconsistent and insufficient to address the regional needs and to counteract the non-scientific analysis and policy responses;
 - while there had been success in integrating ageing and the demographic dividend into regional and national frameworks (albeit with more focus on ageing), success in influencing United Nations system-wide planning processes was more limited; and
 - financing population and development work in the region remained a challenge, and the level of specialist staffing did not meet the scale of regional needs.¹³¹
83. EECARO has continually increased its support to country offices to better understand and reflect on how to embed a demographic resilience approach in CPDs and country programming while simultaneously adhering to the UNFPA strategic plan framework and objectives, at the centre of which are the transformative results. However, challenges remain.¹³² The key important linkage for EECARO between demographic resilience and the transformative results is how demographic resilience repackages the transformative results as part of the solution to addressing demographic change while simultaneously recognizing that government responses to demographic change may threaten progress on the transformative results.¹³³
84. In many ways, there is a sense that a clear chain of population data, population dynamics and population and development support would be a more relevant entry point into the issues prioritized by many governments in the region than simply a fourth population data-only-related “0” that was referenced in Finding 4 on data and evidence. Population dynamics incorporates population data - the foundation of everything; population dynamics - the analysis of the data, including forward-looking projections at the societal level; and population and development, being how UNFPA can support governments to use demographic intelligence to develop rights-based policies and legislation that addresses demographic challenges without violating rights at the individual level.¹³⁴
85. The UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia has been, since the beginning, invaluable to low fertility and ageing settings. However, EECARO has, over the last year, made substantial efforts to ensure it is also recognized as valuable to currently high fertility/demographic dividend settings. Demographic resilience has since evolved to become more focused on population decline (not just ageing), which is a phenomenon experienced across the world, but the low fertility aspect that results in population decline either now or at some point in the future and impacts on health, education, economics, and the whole of society.¹³⁵
86. Population decline is not just due to low fertility but also outmigration, which is a challenge for several countries within the EECA region. In this way, demographic resilience is evolving beyond low fertility and ageing, and beginning to incorporate other megatrends more holistically.¹³⁶
87. Multiple country examples exist of the practical application and added value of demographic resilience in low fertility and high outmigration contexts of Eastern European and Western Balkans and high fertility and high outmigration contexts of Central Asia. In Eastern Europe and the Balkans, UNFPA has been addressing challenges caused by demographic shifts and building demographic resilience in a gender-transformative and evidence-based manner, where the population dynamics support to the governments is considered one of UNFPA’s most important comparative advantages. UNFPA’s demographic resilience support builds on the organization’s data work (e.g., GGS; population projections) with achievements that are mainly at the normative level, for

¹³¹ UNFPA. Evaluation of UNFPA support to population dynamics and data. Volume 3. 2023.

¹³² EECARO study.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ EECARO study.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

instance, the mainstreaming of ageing in national development policies and programmes; population policies that address demographic challenges and opportunities; and gender-responsive family policies at work.¹³⁷ This is strong across Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Belarus and Albania.¹³⁸

88. In Central Asia, governments increasingly recognise the relevance of demographic resilience, even in currently high fertility contexts. Even a year ago, there was a strong sense across UNFPA country offices in Central Asia that demographic resilience was only for Eastern Europe. However, EECARO is credited with reframing the programme to make it easier for Central Asia UNFPA country offices to promote the concept to governments. And it has worked. For example, while Uzbekistan currently has high fertility (3.17) and a prominent youth bulge, providing a potential demographic dividend to leverage now, the development of demographic forecasting models shows a trajectory towards rapid ageing within the next 25 years. UNFPA's support for this has been invaluable, as has support for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, where UNFPA has supported PSAs and population projections to advise governments on addressing demographic change in rights-based ways.¹³⁹
89. Demographic resilience poses some challenges at the country level. As the concept and programme have evolved, many key informants have questioned the gaps and whether UNFPA has the expertise to address those gaps without considering partnerships.¹⁴⁰ The main issue is the integration of other megatrends. There is an apparent understanding within EECARO that population decline is not based on low fertility alone, and how it is impacted by migration, digitalization and technology, and other megatrends of growing inequality and climate change - and the interaction between these megatrends, as both drivers and consequences.¹⁴¹ There is also a clear sense that this is something that UNFPA cannot address alone, and maybe should not, but that the regional programme currently has not established the necessary partnerships with other United Nations agencies and global entities to have a more comprehensive and holistic approach to demographic challenges (being potentially FAO, IOM, ILO, IMF and the World Bank). There are also not necessarily enough linkages with the UNFPA youth portfolio, with youth outmigration being a significant part of the issue¹⁴². At the country level, key informants in multiple countries raised concerns about the lack of necessary support to integrate these megatrends.¹⁴³
90. A further gap is demographic resilience in humanitarian, fragile, and post-conflict contexts. For example, demographic challenges exist in Ukraine and have been exacerbated by the war in many ways. Evidence suggests a clear need to develop a nexus approach by investing more in demographic intelligence and forecasting, including data linked to migration and displacement.¹⁴⁴
91. Beyond demographic resilience and how EECARO attempts to integrate other megatrends into a more holistic concept of demographic resilience, there is some work across the region, specifically on digital violence within a GBV response. Across the region, the megatrend of digitalization is leading to increased violence in the digital space. In Moldova, UNFPA took up this topic in the global "Body Rights" campaign to raise awareness and promote the regulation of online space with governments and tech companies. UNFPA pioneered a national communications campaign during the 16 Days of Activism and is conducting policy advocacy with the government to change relevant laws and regulations at the country level, which partner key informants very much appreciate.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁷ UNFPA Moldova KIIs and document review, including EECARO Annual Report 2022; EECARO Annual Report 2023; EECARO Inputs to Executive Directors Report 2022; UNFPA Moldova Annual Report 2022.

¹³⁸ Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Belarus and Albania country studies.

¹³⁹ Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan country studies.

¹⁴⁰ EECARO study.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² EECARO study,

¹⁴³ Moldova, Serbia, North Macedonia, Armenia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan country studies.

¹⁴⁴ EECARO and Ukraine country study.

¹⁴⁵ Moldova country study.

In Serbia, UNFPA has started to address violence in the digital space.¹⁴⁶ In North Macedonia, UNFPA has begun work to mitigate the effects of technology-facilitated GBV (TF-GBV), which goes beyond violence in the digital space to include other technologies such as drones.¹⁴⁷ In Belarus, UNFPA is working on violence in the digital space, particularly in terms of demonstrating the risks (especially to young people) and how to recognize digital violence and take it seriously.¹⁴⁸

Finding 8 (humanitarian response capacity): The war in Ukraine and its multiple and complex consequences in EECA (including the persisting conflict surrounding the Karabakh region) have dramatically changed the setting in which UNFPA operates in the EECA region. As a result, UNFPA has scaled up its short-term capacities and positioned itself as a stronger humanitarian actor.

92. Overall, in the EECA region, the organization's humanitarian response capacity has not been driven by the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 and the strategic shift, but by recent realities on the ground, especially the COVID-19 pandemic and armed conflict. Above all, EECARO and the UNFPA country offices in Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova have adapted well to working in conflict settings that have generated considerable refugee flows. They have managed to position UNFPA as a stronger humanitarian actor.
93. Key informants commend EECARO's support for UNFPA's response to the regional humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, including the successful mobilization of considerable humanitarian funds for Ukraine and the regional refugee response. Humanitarian funding permitted the regional office to significantly expand its humanitarian team from initially one Humanitarian Response Specialist to over ten persons on various contract modalities.¹⁴⁹
94. In Moldova, the size of the country office has increased from around 15 to 52 personnel. The refugee response has extended to co-chairing with UNHCR the GBV Sub-sector with more than 50 members; influencing the Moldova Refugee Response Plan; the provision of dignity kits; the operationalization of (mobile) safe spaces for women, young people and older persons; technical capacity building for the health and social sectors; collaboration with the National Health Insurance Company to guarantee female refugees a full package of reproductive healthcare services; and the creation of colposcopy centres across the country.¹⁵⁰
95. Besides Moldova, humanitarian funding also covered UNFPA's refugee response in Poland, Romania and Slovakia, where UNFPA, contrary to other United Nations agencies, could not build on formal relationships with the host governments, a permanent physical presence or long-standing partners. Instead, EECARO adopted a two-level approach with the deployment of roving GBV and SRH experts and the creation of new partnerships with local and international CSOs to deliver life-saving SRH and GBV-related services to refugees and strengthen coordination mechanisms at national and regional levels. However, it has been challenging to receive monitoring data and information about results. Affected in the long-term by political concerns, UNFPA's support for Ukrainian refugees in Belarus was limited to the operationalization of two safe spaces and the provision of hygiene items at the start of the war.¹⁵¹
96. Building on its staff's broad experience and expertise, EECARO has also provided important and valuable support for the Armenia refugee response - e.g., in strategic positioning, inter-agency coordination, resource mobilization and international media coverage. Thanks to solid preparedness interventions (see above) and, *inter alia*, rapid deployment of humanitarian coordinators, an operation manager and SRH and GBV humanitarian specialists, UNFPA was

¹⁴⁶ Serbia country study.

¹⁴⁷ North Macedonia country study.

¹⁴⁸ Belarus country study.

¹⁴⁹ EECARO and Ukraine country studies. Contract modalities including TA, FTA, consultancy and surge deployments.

¹⁵⁰ Moldova country study.

¹⁵¹ EECARO and Ukraine country studies.

reportedly among the first humanitarian actors on the ground. Nevertheless, contrary to the Ukraine crisis, which has raised significant attention and resources, UNFPA's humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in Armenia suffered from limited donor funding.¹⁵²

Finding 9 (Focus on achieving the transformative results by 2030): Given progress to date and significant other needs and priorities in the EECA region, especially pertaining to population development and demographic resilience, a strict positioning of UNFPA under the umbrella of the transformative results would limit the UNFPA's relevance.

97. All programme countries included in the scope of this evaluation are categorized as Tier III, except Tajikistan (Tier II). These eleven countries represent one-third of the 30 countries globally that have achieved at least two transformative results based on data for (i) need for family planning satisfied with modern methods, (ii) maternal mortality ratio; and (iii) gender inequality index.¹⁵³
98. Irrespective of the considerable progress made, UNFPA country offices have continued to cover all transformative results, including child marriage¹⁵⁴ and GBSS.¹⁵⁵ They have done so to strengthen national resilience and support further progress towards zero - at the normative and operational levels and in development and humanitarian settings (e.g., conflict-induced increased maternal mortality and lack of access to family planning in Ukraine). They have received valuable support from EECARO and have mainly focused on left-behind groups with larger needs - e.g., PwD and Roma women and girls.
99. However, UNFPA country offices in the EECA region are small in terms of human and financial resources and are thinly stretched. Because of this, they have, for the most part,¹⁵⁶ worked on improving maternal health and family planning and fighting GBV and harmful practices without a long-term plan for achieving zero by 2030, and, in the case of GBV and GBSS without (internationally comparable) data for tracking progress and corporate contributions.¹⁵⁷
100. Furthermore, UNFPA has not optimally used UNSDCFs to leverage United Nations sister agencies: In 2022, the Formative Evaluation of the UNFPA Engagement in the Reform of the United Nations Development System found that the extent to which Common Country Analyses (CCAs) and UNSDCFs in the EECA region reflected UNFPA's transformative results was high, but there was room for improving the coherence between prioritization and the use of performance indicators in UNSDCFs and CPDs, respectively.
101. Neither do the transformative results - especially reducing the unmet need for family planning by expanding the availability and choice of contraceptives - speak directly to political priorities, significant SRH needs, or donor interests in the EECA region.¹⁵⁸ Thus, given local development contexts (including European integration), UNFPA does not exclusively focus on the transformative results, a trend that key informants acknowledge and support.¹⁵⁹ Instead, the organization's evidence-based population development work, which goes beyond achieving the transformative results, is of greater relevance to governments and politicians in EECA who are facing or expecting low fertility and ageing populations and to women who are forced to make an either-or choice between a family and a career and whose SRH rights are threatened because of governments' pro-

¹⁵² EECARO and Armenia country study. UNFPA only managed to raise 30% of the required funding.

¹⁵³ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. Annex 3 Business Model. 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia country studies.

¹⁵⁵ Albania and Armenia country studies.

¹⁵⁶ See investment cases and the EECARO Roadmap for Ending Unmet Need for Family Planning in Eastern Europe and Central Asia by 2030.

¹⁵⁷ The UNFPA strategic plan does not include an indicator for GBSS.

¹⁵⁸ EECARO and Armenia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan country studies.

¹⁵⁹ EECARO study.

natalist responses. UNFPA support for HIV prevention and cervical cancer screening and immunization also responds to significant SRHR needs.¹⁶⁰

102. While work on population development and demographic resilience, as well as HIV and cervical cancer prevention, are within UNFPA's mandate, increased country office investments in supporting and empowering older persons ("active ageing") - e.g., digital literacy and inter-generational dialogue - are not, to the extent that interventions are not declared as entry points to improving SRHR and GBV prevention and protection of older women or women and girls in general.¹⁶¹

Finding 10 (Shift from funding to financing): Leveraging development financing for UNFPA's priorities is very relevant to the EECA region. However, UNFPA lacks the expertise, tools and incentives to make a considerable difference and continues to require its own funding to remain relevant.

103. Consulted UNFPA staff welcome the funding-to-financing strategic shift in the UNFPA strategic plan. However, as the MTR of the strategic plan also revealed, it is not well understood by UNFPA country offices in the EECA region.¹⁶² This said, key informants for the present regional programme evaluation concur that:

- financing (as opposed to funding) does not flow through UNFPA accounts;
- leveraging financing is very relevant to the EECA region, where there is a lack of reliable and sustainable funding for UNFPA priorities¹⁶³;
- corporate expertise, conceptual and implementation guidance and tools for operationalizing the strategic shift are inadequate¹⁶⁴;
- to remain relevant as a partner, UNFPA continues to require its own funding, and thus, a balance between funding and financing should be sought rather than promoting a shift to financing¹⁶⁵; and
- country offices are under pressure to achieve resource mobilization targets, but the UNFPA strategic plan lacks an indicator for tracking and recognizing successful leveraging of external development financing¹⁶⁶.

104. Evidence reveals some successful efforts by EECARO and UNFPA country offices to influence the spending decisions of programme country governments and the private sector in the EECA region (not IFIs).¹⁶⁷ In Tajikistan, for instance, the government introduced a contraceptive supplies budget line into the state budget. The Government of Albania institutionalized a national cervical cancer screening and immunization programme. In North Macedonia, UNFPA and WHO supported the government to prioritize the mobilization of IPA funding for improving maternal health. Key informants consider the regional programme "Expanding Choices: Gender-Responsive Family Policies for the Private Sector" an excellent example of influencing private sector companies to invest their own resources to become more gender-responsive and family-friendly.

¹⁶⁰ Albania, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan country studies.

¹⁶¹ Belarus, Moldova and Serbia country studies.

¹⁶² EECARO and country studies. The MTR of the strategic plan revealed that only 31 % of EECA country offices had a good level of knowledge as regards shifting from funding to financing (as opposed to 14 % globally). PPT EECA MTR Summary.

¹⁶³ EECARO and Kazakhstan, Moldova and Serbia country studies. Also see UNFPA MTR.

¹⁶⁴ EECARO and Moldova and Turkmenistan country studies.

¹⁶⁵ Belarus, Moldova and Turkmenistan country studies.

¹⁶⁶ EECARO and Moldova and North Macedonia country studies.

¹⁶⁷ EECARO and Albania, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan country studies.

105. Views are not unanimous, but investment cases¹⁶⁸ are generally considered valuable tools¹⁶⁹, although not many appear to have been produced so far. An investment case for ending unmet need for family planning in Turkmenistan reportedly contributed to an increase in domestic procurement of contraceptives and an expansion of free access.

Finding 11 (Normative role): There is limited evidence of any shifts in strengthening UNFPA’s normative role in the region for traditional mandate areas, which has always been strong and a primary mode of engagement since before the current strategic plan. However, there is a significant upshift in normative work around demographic resilience attributable to the demographic realities of the context.

106. UNFPA in the EECA region predominantly engages in upstream work, and normative work is the basis of all interventions. This has not been driven by the strategic plan 2022-2025 but rather by the MIC characteristics of the region.¹⁷⁰ Building on lessons learned from work conducted under previous regional programmes, the regional programme 2022-2025 commits UNFPA to “strengthening policy and programming with a priority on the hardest-to-reach vulnerable groups; strengthening advocacy to mobilize political support for the ICPD agenda and address the pushback on SRH and gender equality; ...”.¹⁷¹ Key activities under Output 1, Policy and Accountability,¹⁷² require a robust normative role of the regional office and country offices, including as regards national emergency preparedness.

107. There are examples across the region of strong normative work in traditional UNFPA mandate areas, particularly SRH and GBV, supported by EECARO. For example, within Uzbekistan, all support from UNFPA is upstream, supported by the regional office, contributing to a rapidly changing and improving national political landscape. For gender equality and GBV, all work started at the policy level - e.g., the National Strategy on Achieving Gender Equality 2030. Based on this law and presidential decrees, the government established rehabilitation and shelter centres in Tashkent and the regions. In 2023, Uzbekistan added new categories of violence to existing laws, including domestic violence and harassment. All were supported by the advocacy of the UNFPA country office with support from EECARO.¹⁷³ In Tajikistan, there are multiple examples of improved public policies, including thanks to the country office with the support of the regional office, including the second National Reproductive Health Programme until 2027 and the National Standards and Protocols for Safe Delivery.¹⁷⁴ In Kazakhstan, EECARO has supported UNFPA’s normative role, particularly in advocacy for integrating SRH into universal health coverage benefits packages.¹⁷⁵ In Turkmenistan, examples of normative work supported by the regional office are technical support to the government on the development of a National Action Plan on Gender Equality for 2021-2025¹⁷⁶ and the development of a costed action plan for applying the EECA Roadmap for Ending the Unmet Need for Family Planning.¹⁷⁷

108. There are also examples of increasing normative work in demographic resilience. This shift has occurred simultaneous to, but not necessarily driven by, the implementation of the current

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/developing-investment-cases-transformative-results-toolkit>.

¹⁶⁹ EECARO and Armenia and Turkmenistan country studies.

¹⁷⁰ EECARO study.

¹⁷¹ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025 (DP/FPA/2021/8). Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme (2022-2025). 2021.

¹⁷² By 2025, improved integration of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, as well as the prevention of and response to gender-based violence and harmful practices, into universal health coverage-related policies and plans, and other relevant laws, policies, plans, and accountability frameworks.

¹⁷³ Uzbekistan country study.

¹⁷⁴ Tajikistan country study.

¹⁷⁵ Kazakhstan country study.

¹⁷⁶ Turkmenistan country study.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

strategic plan and particularly connects the strategic plan shifts of addressing and integrating megatrends, particularly demographic change and strengthening the normative role. Across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, Belarus and Armenia, there is a normative focus on ageing, low fertility and outmigration, including support for national policy documents around strategies on demography, support for older persons, and parenting.¹⁷⁸ There is evidence of legislative change in support of work-life balance for parents and caregivers in Moldova.¹⁷⁹

109. Where there is less evidence of success is UNFPA's regional role in integrating emergency preparedness into the normative role (linking both to humanitarian action and the HDP nexus). In Ukraine, UNFPA has been able to continue playing a normative role, given the unique context of Ukraine in terms of having a functioning healthcare system before the war, with UNFPA providing mainly GBV support. However, with the support of EECARO, the country office has increased the value of UNFPA to the Government of Ukraine with increased interventions in the SRH area, supporting government health services.¹⁸⁰ In Moldova, UNFPA, with the support of EECARO, has also involved itself at the normative level in the formulation (based on disaggregated data) of the national emergency plan, together with other United Nations agencies, the main contingencies being refugees and earthquakes, but also the possibility of a nuclear plant catastrophe in Ukraine.¹⁸¹ In Serbia, normative work has also been part of UNFPA's efforts to strengthen national emergency preparedness, although interviews suggest that more could be done.¹⁸²

110. However, some clear challenges for normative work remain:

- Firstly, there is no consistent understanding across the region of what is meant by normative work. Is it legislative work only? Or any support for governments or any upstream work rather than programmatic intervention?¹⁸³
- Secondly, while normative work undertaken through the advocacy and policy mode of engagement is the most natural and most utilized support from UNFPA in the region with mainly MICs, there is a clear sense that for UNFPA to be credible at the normative level, UNFPA must also bring funds and provide services at the programmatic level. In a context of minimal donor funds, this presents a challenge: "Countries are growing tired of only talking."^{184, 185}
- Thirdly, there is an absence of a clear regional priority as part of the normative framework using regional intergovernmental processes, which are limited in terms of translating global initiatives (such as ICPD30) into practical and implementable regional actions.¹⁸⁶

3.3. To What Extent Have Enablers Facilitated the Implementation of the Accelerators and Strategic Shifts within EECA?

Summary: Regional/multi-country programmes, often facilitated by EECARO, have greatly enabled the implementation of county programmes, including the accelerators and strategic shifts, as have country office clusters and the delegation of authority to country offices to determine modes of engagement. On the other hand, corporate knowledge management has a lot of potential, but it has emerged as a great weakness. The RAS/RDS, with its focus on Tier I countries, does not provide country offices in EECA with a critical mass of predictable resources. A stronger corporate emphasis on EU accession considerations for Eastern Europe would be welcomed.

¹⁷⁸ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, Belarus and Armenia country studies.

¹⁷⁹ Moldova country study.

¹⁸⁰ Ukraine country study.

¹⁸¹ EECARO study.

¹⁸² Serbia country study.

¹⁸³ Evidence derived from all country studies and different understandings of the normative role.

¹⁸⁴ EECARO KII.

¹⁸⁵ Note that this links quite strongly to the funding-to-financing agenda – see Finding 10.

¹⁸⁶ EECARO KII.

Finding 12 (Strategic communications): There has not been a consistent internal approach to communicating the accelerators or strategic shifts beyond what is written in the strategic plan. Externally, they have been an integral aspect of communications about UNFPA’s programmes and activities rather than the subject of dedicated communications, enabled by investments in dedicated communication staff.

111. There are mixed views on the quality of internal communications regarding the strategic plan in general and the accelerators and strategic shifts in particular, leaving some UNFPA personnel feeling as though they are not relevant to their area of work.¹⁸⁷

112. According to the regional programme 2022-2025, in support of achieving regional programme results, EECARO “will further expand its communication efforts to strengthen the visibility and profile of UNFPA as a thought leader on ICPD issues and to help generate support for the ICPD agenda and the regional advocacy priorities in the EECA region. A particular focus will be placed on leveraging new and existing partnerships for visibility and outreach to new audiences, strengthening communications capacities across the organization in the region, enhancing efforts to influence social norms, and supporting resource mobilization.”¹⁸⁸

113. The accelerators and strategic shifts have not been the subject of dedicated external communications to governments, partners or other stakeholders such as other United Nations agencies, and neither has the strategic plan per se. In many respects, this is because the overarching goals of UNFPA, framed as the transformative results, are not among governments’ top priorities within EECA.¹⁸⁹ For example, stakeholders in the Western Balkans believe that demographic resilience and communicating UNFPA’s added value in this area rather than communicating the strategic plan is UNFPA’s “saving grace”.¹⁹⁰

114. However, while the accelerators and strategic shifts have not been the subject of dedicated public communications, they have been an integral aspect of UNFPA’s messaging - e.g., data, LNOB, partnerships and gender.¹⁹¹ For example, in Moldova, the communications strategy references a combination of accelerators and strategic shifts. It emphasises the importance of attitude and behaviour change campaigns besides communication campaigns to achieve the transformative results. There are other examples of how external communications have operationalized or supported the accelerators and strategic shifts, specifically:¹⁹²

- the use of digital means, especially Instagram as an image-based communications tool;
- demographic resilience messaging at regional and country level, including opinion pieces on family policies and ageing; and
- teamwork across country office-regional office-HQ levels for successful humanitarian communications in support of UNFPA’s positioning as a critical actor in the region, especially regarding the war in Ukraine.

115. There are also examples of good practice where funding has allowed for the recruitment of dedicated, professional communications staff, for instance, in Ukraine, where the country programme evaluation in 2022 recommended that good practices in communications within the

¹⁸⁷ EECARO and Albania, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan country studies.

¹⁸⁸ UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025 (DP/FPA/2021/8). Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme (2022-2025). 2021.

¹⁸⁹ EECARO and Moldova and North Macedonia country studies.

¹⁹⁰ UNFPA country level KII.

¹⁹¹ EECARO and Moldova and North Macedonia country studies.

¹⁹² UNFPA. UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025 (DP/FPA/2021/8). Annex 4. Global and regional programmes. 5. Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme (2022-2025). 2021, EECARO Annual Report 2022, EECARO Annual Report 2023.

Ukraine country office should be built upon and expanded; but also in Albania, Moldova and North Macedonia.¹⁹³

Finding 13 (Knowledge management): Despite commitments in the EECA regional programme and CPDs, knowledge management is generally weak and has not been applied to enable UNFPA country offices to operationalize the accelerators and strategic shifts.

116. Corporate knowledge management strategies have guided knowledge management within UNFPA. However, a new strategy covering the period of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 (and beyond) was not launched until 2024. It does not explicitly mention knowledge management as an enabler for the accelerators and strategic shifts.
117. The overall vision of the EECA regional programme 2022-2025 is to amplify UNFPA results in the region through knowledge management, among other things. The regional programme commits EECARO to institutionalize learning and strengthen knowledge management. In addition, many reviewed CPDs highlight knowledge management as a mode of engagement.¹⁹⁴
118. Key informants very much appreciate EECARO's responsiveness to bilateral requests for information. The UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia and regional/multi-country programmes and mechanisms such as CISPop, EU4Gender Equality, Expanding Choices: Gender-Responsive Family Policies for the Private Sector, and the Regional Alliance for Cervical Cancer Prevention have served well as platforms for knowledge sharing and for ensuring coherence - among participating UNFPA country offices and national stakeholders.¹⁹⁵
119. However, evidence gathered reveals general disappointment regarding knowledge management and support from the global and regional levels of the organization. EECARO has produced and disseminated valuable public knowledge products, but haphazardly. In particular, EECARO has not generated targeted knowledge products or organized knowledge exchange events to support the implementation of accelerators and strategic shifts - e.g., key informants pointed out that UNFPA in EECA has not routinely produced knowledge products about (digital) innovations.¹⁹⁶ Focal point meetings organized by EECARO for exchanging and learning from regional experiences among country office specialists are welcome, but key informants often requested more regular/frequent in-person events.¹⁹⁷
120. Explicit and implicit knowledge (about specific projects and programmes) is insufficiently documented and scattered across different platforms and Google Drive folders.¹⁹⁸

Finding 14 (Business model): While the current business model is appreciated for its flexibility in terms of modes of engagement, there are serious concerns about the resources allocation system, which does not provide UNFPA country offices in EECA or EECARO with the critical mass of predictable resources.

121. Key informants appreciate the more flexible business model of the current strategic plan, in which the modes of engagement are no longer centrally defined by colour quadrants but at a more decentralized level by country contexts.¹⁹⁹
122. Resource distribution data presented as part of the MTR of the UNFPA strategic plan shows that

¹⁹³ EECARO and Albania, Moldova, North Macedonia and Ukraine country studies.

¹⁹⁴ Albania, Armenia, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkmenistan country studies.

¹⁹⁵ Serbia and Turkmenistan country studies.

¹⁹⁶ EECARO study.

¹⁹⁷ Belarus, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkmenistan country studies.

¹⁹⁸ Albania country study.

¹⁹⁹ EECARO and Uzbekistan country studies.

- out of 60% of core resources for UNFPA country offices (institutional budget and regular resources combined), only 3.4% was for the EECA region;
 - out of USD 56 million distributed from UNFPA global trust funds, only close to USD 1 million were allocated to EECA country offices (or 1.7%);
 - while approximately USD 50 million (institutional budget and regular resources) went to the global and regional programmes (GRP) - i.e., about 10% of the entire resources available for distribution, only 1.2% of this 10% went to EECARO;
 - of the USD 32 million in regular resources for the GRP, only USD 4.1 million was for EECARO or about 13%, after receiving some additional funds.
123. Based on these figures, EECARO concluded that a rethinking of the RAS/RDS was required in light of drastic changes in the region to be able to adjust institutional budget positions in the country offices and for EECARO to strengthen its technical and programmatic capacities²⁰⁰, which would also include more core resources for strengthening and stabilizing EECARO's humanitarian team.²⁰¹
124. Expenditure statistics²⁰² and key informant interviews confirm that the current RAS/RDS, which privileges Tier I programme countries that are furthest away from achieving the transformative results, is neglecting the EECA region.²⁰³ In particular, the RAS does not consider the increasingly relevant work in the region in the area of data and analytics and population development (demographic resilience), thus ensuring that everybody is counted and that programme countries tackle the challenges and seize the opportunities of demographic change from a human rights and gender-transformative perspective.²⁰⁴
125. UNFPA country offices, despite a gross increase in the minimum annual ceiling from USD 300,000 to USD 500,000 for the current strategic plan period²⁰⁵, have lacked a critical mass of sustainable funding for staffing on the one hand and long-term programme planning and implementation on the other. This has necessitated personnel to allocate valuable time to mobilizing resources for projects (including budget lines for project staff) to support policy implementation - with varied prospects for success - and, in some cases, has led to a dilution of UNFPA's strategic positioning as an SRH agency.²⁰⁶ The organization's engagement in active ageing programmes and projects in response to government requests and donor interests is a case in point.²⁰⁷
126. UNFPA is present in 17 Eastern European and Central Asian countries - as opposed to other United Nations agencies with a broader-based country presence and/or formal relationships and professional networks in the region and whose country offices are supported by "European and Central Asia" regional offices. UNFPA's organizational set-up complicated UNFPA's refugee response in non-programme countries neighbouring Ukraine - i.e., Poland, Romania and Slovakia.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁰ PPT MTR EECA November; PPT EB MTR December.

²⁰¹ EECARO.

²⁰² UNFPA. Financial and Statistical Reports, 2019-2023.

²⁰³ EECARO study; PD evaluation 2023.

²⁰⁴ EECARO study.

²⁰⁵ EECARO study; UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 Annex 3 Business Model: „For the new strategic plan cycle (2022-2025), UNFPA has set the minimum floor to \$500,000 per annum for every country programme to perform essential functions, including normative roles in advocacy and policy dialogue, knowledge management and partnership building“. However, net increases have been less due to inflation and currency fluctuations - e.g., Armenia and Moldova.

²⁰⁶ Albania, Moldova and Turkmenistan country studies.

²⁰⁷ Belarus, Moldova and Serbia country studies.

²⁰⁸ EECARO study.

Finding 15 (Other enablers): EECARO-facilitated regional and multi-country programmes, alongside UNFPA country office clusters, have significantly contributed to implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts. Additionally, financial and human resources have played a crucial role, albeit with concerns regarding their sustainability. Furthermore, EU accession is a valuable platform for enhancing UNFPA's normative role in Eastern Europe.

127. Resource mobilization: Given limited core resources for country offices in EECA, successful fundraising is needed to operationalize the accelerators and strategic shifts. Despite traditionally scarce fundraising opportunities, in 2022, 12 country offices and EECARO achieved their resource mobilization targets. EECA country offices raised the region's highest co-financing volume ever recorded, at over USD 76 million. However, this was mainly due to humanitarian funding for the Ukraine response.²⁰⁹ Moreover, in 2023, financial resources raised from the private sector (USD 903,000) far exceeded the amounts previously raised.
128. Key informants also consider the UNFPA Strategic Investment Facility (SIF) helpful for mobilizing funding for testing ideas that embed innovation. They indicated that EECARO could play a valuable role in coaching country offices and ensuring that the Facility rewards ideas for normative work (not only service delivery).²¹⁰ Multi-Donor Trust Funds (MDTFs), for example, the United Nations Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD), the Peacebuilding Fund, and the Uzbekistan Vision 2030 Fund were also important sources of funding for UNFPA in the region.²¹¹
129. Human resources: The humanitarian capacities of EECARO significantly increased in 2023, predominantly thanks to resources mobilized in response to the Ukraine conflict. EECARO has taken the opportunity to use Ukraine funding to enhance and expand humanitarian capacity beyond Ukraine, and this has made a compelling difference in terms of support and technical assistance to country offices, both for humanitarian preparedness and emergency response.²¹² For example, in Armenia, while the burden on the team with simultaneous COVID-19 and refugee crises was very high, deploying a humanitarian coordinator and humanitarian GBV and SRH specialists from EECARO during the first days of the crisis was very valuable.²¹³ However, newly created positions are dependent on short-term funding. There is no clear plan for how the EECARO humanitarian unit will continue its work past 2024 when current funding ends and if no new funding is secured. The UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 and the humanitarian capacities strategic shift have not translated into a more sustainable longer-term humanitarian capacity plan.²¹⁴
130. For non-humanitarian work, EECARO appears overstretched, and staff have been occupied with “a myriad of things,” which has prevented advisors from spending time on knowledge management, partnering (e.g., with think tanks), innovation and strategic thinking around the accelerators and strategic shifts.²¹⁵
131. At the country level, given the considerable number of countries and diversity of the region, coupled with the scarcity of both regular and other resources, there is no standard human resources model. However, many staff are double-hatting and act as ‘focal points’ for core UNFPA work.²¹⁶ For population dynamics, specifically, there appears to be a vast difference in the quality of the implementation of the UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia between those country offices with population development staff and those

²⁰⁹ EECARO study.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² UNFPA regional KIIs and document review, including EECARO Annual Report 2022 and EECARO Annual Report 2023.

²¹³ Armenia country study.

²¹⁴ UNFPA regional KIIs.

²¹⁵ EECARO study.

²¹⁶ Moldova, Serbia and Tajikistan country studies.

without.²¹⁷ In North Macedonia, for example, key informants report that UNFPA needs to increase its competencies in population dynamics if it wants to continue playing a lead role in data and demography. Economists, demographers, and statisticians are required.²¹⁸

132. Two overarching human resources issues concern the type and level of UNFPA staff competencies. Key informants suggested that human resources plans, aligned to the transformative results, are not representative of the kind of expertise sought by governments in the region.²¹⁹ Furthermore, using scarce core resources for programmatic activities has not allowed country offices to invest in more senior staff to manage key priorities, such as the organization's normative work and funding-to-financing, to reach governments and partners at the right level.²²⁰
133. Regional programmes: Regional/multi-country programmes have allowed for more consistent and comprehensive approaches and attracted more advice, support and attention from EECARO and HQ. They have the benefit that conceptual thinking is led centrally by EECARO with adaptation and implementation at the country level.²²¹
134. In many countries, UNFPA country programmes have benefited from regional/multi-country programmes and initiatives launched by EECARO with regional donor funding, such as CISPop, Expanding Choices through Family-friendly Policies and EU4Gender Equality. For Moldova, for example, benefits are reported in the form of time saved for programme staff, additional funding and better branding and communication tools.²²² In Serbia, respondents report particularly benefiting from EECARO efforts to initiate, develop and fundraise for regional/multi-country programmes, which is also more appealing to the European Union. They suggest that UNFPA should capitalize more on the advantages of multi-country (regional) programmes, especially on cross-boundary and sensitive programme areas - e.g., human rights.²²³ In Uzbekistan, strong co-creation of programmes and direction between the country offices and regional office advisors and more regional partnerships with activities at the country level would be appreciated.²²⁴ Key informants in Albania also reported being appreciative of more regional/sub-regional programmes negotiated and managed by the regional office, including in the context of European Union accession.²²⁵
135. Sub-regional clusters: Besides regional/multi-country programmes, clustering UNFPA country offices is a good practice and has helped to target EECARO support. The Central Asia cluster is helpful and has made a difference thanks to trustworthy relationships, mutual support and sharing of knowledge and expertise, for example, regarding demographic resilience and joint resource mobilization.²²⁶ The Western Balkans cluster is the largest and a very active cluster, with the Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), North Macedonia and Serbia country offices united by their support for national aspirations to join the European Union.^{227,228} Key informants agree on the benefits of information sharing, learning about good practices, setting up repositories, and developing joint strategies without language barriers. They also emphasize the value of the European Union accession process and European Union reform processes for

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ North Macedonia country study.

²¹⁹ EECARO and Bosnia and Herzegovina country studies.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ UNFPA regional and multiple country KIIs.

²²² Moldova country study.

²²³ Serbia country study.

²²⁴ Uzbekistan country study.

²²⁵ Albania country study.

²²⁶ Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan country studies.

²²⁷ Multiple UNFPA country KIIs.

²²⁸ There are eight EU candidate countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, and Ukraine.

furthering UNFPA's strategic goals - i.e., as an enabler - which requires corporate support, particularly from EECARO and the UNFPA Representation Office in Brussels.²²⁹ On the other hand, due to recent changes in response to crises and political sensitivities, Armenia, Belarus and Moldova are no longer part of any clusters, which is perceived as a disadvantage.

4. Conclusions

136. The six conclusions provided in this Section are the evaluation team's reasoned judgments on EECARO support for applying the UNFPA strategic plan accelerators and strategic shifts in light of accelerating progress towards achieving the transformative results and tackling unfinished business by 2030.

137. The conclusions stem from the analysis and findings presented in Section 3 of this report. They straddle the interlinked accelerators, strategic shifts and enablers for accelerating progress towards the transformative results. Conclusions 1 through 4 provide a synthesized overview of the overarching themes identified across the entire spectrum of evaluation questions and sub-questions. These themes encompass corporate concepts and guidance (Conclusion 1), regional programme design (Conclusion 2), implementation support (Conclusion 3), and the relevance of transformative results (Conclusion 4). Conclusions 5 and 6 offer a more in-depth analysis of the two primary focus areas of the evaluation - i.e., demographic resilience and humanitarian preparedness and response.

Conclusion 1 (Concepts and guidance): EECARO was tasked with integrating and rolling out the accelerators and strategic shifts designed to expedite progress towards the transformative results without the benefit of clarity of concepts, precision of expectations or comprehensive guidance.

138. Regarding their design, underlying ideas and principles, the accelerators and strategic shifts of the UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025 are not clear-cut concepts. There is no apparent difference between the notion of an accelerator and that of a strategic shift, and there is considerable duplication - e.g., in the areas of humanitarian preparedness and financing. There is also overlap with the strategic plan modes of engagement - e.g., partnerships and SSTC - and principles - e.g., LNOB. Most accelerators and strategic shifts predate the UNFPA strategic plan. They appear to be nothing new compared to the implementation of the UNFPA strategic plan 2018-2021, but instead, something EECARO and UNFPA country offices in the region were already doing - e.g., HRBA and data and evidence work.

139. Accordingly, when the strategic plan 2022-2025 was approved, the UNFPA regional office was unclear about any shifts in corporate expectations and ambitions in terms of implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts. Besides the listing of potential intervention strategies for the accelerators in Annex 2 of the strategic plan²³⁰, EECARO received no further directions or implementation guidance from UNFPA HQ. Inadequate communications on definitions (e.g., funding to financing, normative role, innovation), changes in approach (e.g., from gender mainstreaming to gender-transformative action), the prioritization of accelerators and strategic shifts, and the embedding of accelerators and strategic shifts in regional and country programmes delayed their integration into regional programming.

Conclusion 2 (regional programme design): The EECA regional programme design for 2022-2025 does not reflect a clear strategy for prioritizing and implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts within the EECA region and its sub-regions. A more rigorous strategic approach is warranted for the subsequent regional programme cycle.

140. While acknowledging the inherent challenges of finalizing regional programmes before the completion of the UNFPA strategic plan, and recognizing the necessity of adhering to corporate

²²⁹ Multiple country studies.

²³⁰ UNFPA strategic plan 2022-2025. Annex 2: Change story of accelerating the three transformative results.

guidance, the design of the EECA regional programme 2022-2025, including the IRRF does not sufficiently reflect a clear strategy or course of action for applying the set of accelerators and strategic shifts within the EECA region and context-specific sub-regions to achieve regional outputs.

141. Despite progress, UNFPA's transformative results agenda remains incomplete in the EECA region. The preparations for formulating the regional programme 2026-2029 and participating in processes leading up to the next strategic plan present an opportune moment for the regional office, in consultation with the UNFPA country offices, to prioritize and strategize substantive strategic shifts and accelerators tailored to the regional and sub-regional contexts and to ensure knowledge and capacity gaps are closed promptly and directions are clear, in order to be ready to implement. This irrespective of whether accelerators and strategic shifts continue to be part of the UNFPA strategic plan, but because they support programming and the achievement of regional objectives.

Conclusion 3 (EECARO programmatic support): The EECA region is among those demonstrating considerable progress towards the transformative results, with EECARO playing a pivotal supportive role in operationalizing the accelerators and strategic shifts to achieve country-level outputs. Nevertheless, significant challenges at the country level remain, and opportunities for further advancement should be considered.

142. There is much evidence that EECARO has helped UNFPA country offices to interpret and implement the different accelerators and strategic shifts at the country level (e.g., gender-transformative action and demographic resilience). It can be assumed that these contributions have generated momentum to accelerate the achievement of the transformative results by 2030.

143. This evidence cannot be systematically attributed to the UNFPA strategic plan or the EECA regional programme. Instead, as mentioned above, UNFPA has traditionally paid attention to numerous accelerators and strategic shifts. Increased focus - e.g., on partnering with the private sector, SSTC through regional/multi-country programmes, generating data and evidence and increasing humanitarian capacities - has mainly been context-driven. Looking ahead, more efforts are required to sustain and ensure continued acceleration, especially in areas where there is regression and pushback.

Conclusion 4 (Relevance of transformative results): UNFPA's global focus on the transformative results and their corresponding indicators, as outlined in the UNFPA strategic plan, overlooks significant regional priorities and opportunities within the organization's mandate. This narrow focus could put UNFPA's role in EECA at risk in the future. A broader look at interlinkages and what is needed in the region would be helpful.

144. EECA is among the regions closest to achieving transformative results. Consequently, and for other reasons, many governments in the region have prioritized other fundamental objectives (e.g., related to population decline and ageing and other essential SRH services), which affects UNFPA's role and relevance in the region, given the current narrative around the transformative results.

145. The ICPD in 1994 represented a pivotal moment for UNFPA. The conference marked a significant paradigmatic shift, redirecting UNFPA's strategic priorities from a primary emphasis on data, population and development to a focus on SRHR. This evaluation argues that governments in the region and those left behind, especially in MICs such as in EECA, Asia and Latin America, rely on UNFPA to ensure that everybody is counted as a foundation for socio-economic development and that it is time to start repositioning UNFPA for the post-2030 agenda.

146. Furthermore, to augment UNFPA's relevance in EECA and beyond, it is essential to reframe the unmet need for family planning transformative results within the context of the significant trend of declining fertility rates, which are influenced by socio-economic factors and various personal

considerations. Additionally, there is a critical need for increased investment in generating comparable data on GBV.

Conclusion 5 (Demographic resilience): UNFPA's focus on demographic resilience, initiated during the 2018-2021 strategic plan cycle, constitutes a critical response to the pronounced megatrend of population ageing and decline across the EECA region. Commendable progress has been made to date, and the development of the following regional programme presents an opportune moment to enhance the framework's adaptability to other megatrends and effectively address the diverse demographic landscapes within the region.

147. The UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia is a robust and contextually relevant framework through which EECARO and UNFPA country offices have provided essential support to governments in the region. This support has been especially pertinent for many countries, particularly across Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where challenges such as ageing populations, low fertility and outmigration are critical. The programme has also evolved to include high-fertility countries in Central Asia, emphasizing a rights-based approach to addressing demographic challenges, demographic changes and population age-structure shifts.

148. The HRBA, gender-transformative action and LNOB accelerators underpin demographic resilience. Although it is applied through a normative mode of engagement - operating at the societal rather than the individual level - demographic resilience work promotes a rights-based and inclusive national response to demographic challenges.

149. Since its inception in 2021, UNFPA's work on demographic resilience has evolved effectively and relevantly, including for countries beyond EECA. However, further considerations are called for expanding the framework, particularly regarding integrating other megatrends into the framework - such as migration - and its application in fragile and humanitarian/post-conflict contexts to ensure demographic resilience reaches its full potential.

Conclusion 6 (Humanitarian preparedness and response): The humanitarian preparedness and response accelerator and strategic shift have assumed increased importance within the EECA region in recent years. To effectively address growing needs, UNFPA's regional programme for 2026-2029 should accord these elements greater prominence.

150. Until recently, a stable region with an emphasis on development cooperation and upstream work, the war in Ukraine and, to some extent, the protracted conflict over the Karabakh region have dominated EECARO's humanitarian work and support for the region since the beginning of the implementation of the current regional programme. Despite initial unpreparedness for crises of such magnitude, EECARO effectively enhanced its humanitarian capacities. Collaborating closely with concerned country offices, it successfully bolstered UNFPA's strategic positioning and visibility as a humanitarian actor, albeit relying on temporary funding and personnel.

151. As a result of crises (and not of the strategic plan), there has also been a notable rise in awareness across UNFPA in the EECA region regarding the significance of bolstering national emergency preparedness efforts to safeguard UNFPA accomplishments and continue on the path towards the transformative results, including but going beyond MISIP.

152. Moving forward, it is imperative to undertake more strategic and evidence-based deliberations on the allocation of time and funding in humanitarian preparedness and response at the regional and country levels. The incorporation of a distinct humanitarian action output stemming from the MTR of the regional programme in 2024 marks a commendable initial step. Further refinement and integration of resilience and humanitarian components with the associated necessary financial and human resources within the next regional programme are warranted to ensure comprehensive and effective preparedness and response mechanisms.

5. Recommendations

- 153. The conclusions in Section 4 pave the way for practical and concrete recommendations targeted at EECARO regarding the conceptualization and implementation of the following regional programme 2026-2029 and the design of the next UNFPA strategic plan 2026-2029.
- 154. Structured from a strategic, programmatic and operational perspective, the recommendations are made in light of further acceleration of progress towards the transformative results and exploration of new directions based on the EECA region's needs and priorities. They assume that, in principle, the assigned roles of the UNFPA regional offices remain unchanged and that family planning, maternal health and the elimination of GBV and other harmful practices remain at the core of the next strategic plan, while the world and UNFPA start to transition to a post-2030 agenda.
- 155. Before finalizing them, preliminary recommendations were presented to regional office staff (in charge of implementing the recommendations) and ERG members for discussion and validation in two separate meetings.

5.1. Strategic Recommendations

<p>Recommendation 1. Aligned with the evolving organizational priorities, EECARO should collaborate with UNFPA HQ to reinforce the organization’s data mandate and further expand its data and analytics work. EECARO should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ reach out to other UNFPA regional offices (likely APRO and LACRO, which are in a similar position) to jointly promote a population data-related fourth transformative result (which goes beyond data for the existing three transformative results), as a way to re-elevate population and development and demographic resilience as a higher-level objective in the next UNFPA strategic plan, linking specifically to the LNOB agenda and making marginalized communities visible. ○ work with its partners to scale up advocacy and support for governments in the region to measure and produce GBV data based on the internationally established methodology, GBV being the only transformative result that cannot be tracked at the regional level.²³¹ ○ conceptualise the linkages between data and other accelerators and the strategic shifts, with briefing papers for UNFPA country offices on the conceptual links, the practical and pragmatic implementation and examples of interventions where linkages have been maximized for most impactful programming. EECARO should start with linkages between (i) data and LNOB: how LNOB can only be meaningfully operationalized where data is available to determine who, in fact, is most left behind and where they are; and (ii) data and financing: how the financing agenda can only be operationalized with solid economic return-on-investment case studies.
<p>Derives from Findings 4, 5, 10 Links to Conclusions 3, 4 Targeted at: EECARO senior management, gender and population development advisors Priority level: High</p>

Recommendation 2. EECARO's contributions to demographic resilience in the face of declining populations have garnered recognition as highly pertinent to the region. EECARO has achieved notable successes and generated valuable lessons for UNFPA globally. Building upon this foundation (and recognizing its increasing relevance worldwide), EECARO should develop a more comprehensive framework.

²³¹ UNFPA is a custodian agency alongside UNICEF, UN Women, WHO and UNODC for SDG indicators 5.2.1 (Tier 1) and 5.2.2 (Tier 2). See Tier Classification for Global SDG Indicators.

Critically, EECARO should, given the projected increase in countries grappling with population decline and ageing, and in anticipation of the post-2030 agenda, and in collaboration with APRO and LACRO, advocate for a **broadened conceptualization of family planning**. This expansion should:

- extend beyond contraceptive methods to encompass the broader concept of 'planning for your family';
- ensure that “family planning” becomes empowering people (women in particular) to plan for their families and obtain desired fertility (which can also include more children if desired), bringing demographic resilience into the heart of the transformative results.

Within the Demographic Resilience Programme, EECARO should ensure that:

- all EECA countries undertake, at a minimum, PSAs and population projections to contribute to demographic intelligence in a consistent manner across the region.
- demographic resilience is reframed away from a ‘low fertility and ageing’ response to one that is applicable and relevant to all countries regardless of their demographic trajectory and is suitable for humanitarian and fragile/post-conflict contexts.
- the Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia is updated, including its theory of change, by linking it to other megatrends, especially migration, and, assuming they will remain at the centre of the next strategic plan, clearly showing interlinkages with the transformative results.
- this renewed conceptualization is used to develop an implementation plan for integrating demographic resilience internally in all CPDs and externally in CCAs and UNSCDFs, and engaging in more joint programming, considering that United Nations partners can add value and expertise (e.g., climate change) and in order to UNFPA not to spread itself too thinly.
- a regional communication strategy for the renewed conceptualization is developed, which incorporates demographic resilience linkages to and support for different accelerators and strategic shifts - LNOB, HDP nexus, the normative role, focus on the transformative results etc.

In addition, EECARO should also collaborate with UNFPA HQ to **clarify the organization’s mandate and role regarding ageing**.

- EECARO should develop guidance for focusing country-level programmatic work (as opposed to normative policy work) with vulnerable older people to improve their SRHR and support GBV survivors in development and humanitarian settings.

Derives from Findings 5, 6, 7, 9

Links to Conclusions 4, 5

Targeted at: EECARO senior management and population and development advisor

Priority level: High

Recommendation 3. In a situation of high demands on development aid, EECARO should prioritize the strategic leveraging of financing for SRHR, GBV and population development while concurrently advocating to UNFPA HQ for the sustained allocation and mobilization of funding for UNFPA programmes in MIC contexts. EECARO should

- promote a “transition from funding to funding and financing” approach in the next UNFPA strategic plan for 2026-2029.
- collaborate with UNFPA HQ to identify indicators for tracking, reporting and communicating the successful leveraging of development financing to increase motivation, recognition and give credit.
- complement its resource mobilization and partnerships plan by formulating a financing strategy for the next regional programme cycle that (i) envisages the development of briefs and

information packages on “how to” leverage financing; (ii) includes a multi-year plan for creating investment cases; (iii) plans for the development of knowledge products on leveraging financing in the EECA region; and (iv) promotes an emphasis of UNSDCF’s on the comparative advantage of United Nations agencies, including UNFPA, at the normative level, as advisors for policy development and implementation (rather than as funders).

- argue for a better reflection of European Union integration objectives in the strategic plan 2026-2029, which would have positive implications for UNFPA’s normative work, partnering, funding and financing in EECA.
- advocate vis-à-vis UNFPA HQ for a shift in corporate financial planning and budgeting - i.e., in the institutional budget and RAS/RDS - for the strategic plan 2026-2029 cycle in order to ensure a critical funding mass and better reflect MIC priorities within the framework of the broader ICPD agenda.

Derives from Finding 10, 15

Links to Conclusions 1, 2, 4

Targeted at: EECARO resource mobilization and partnerships advisors

Priority level: High

5.2 Programmatic Recommendations

Recommendation 4. Leveraging UNFPA’s firm positioning as a humanitarian actor in the region over recent years, and based on a clear understanding of EECARO’s role vis-à-vis the UNFPA Programme and Humanitarian Response Divisions, EECARO should expand its support for enhancing national resilience to and preparedness for emergencies. The regional office should do so by

- investing more time in environmental scanning and foresight for UNFPA country offices and their national and international partners to anticipate future changes and prepare for and adapt to crises, including at the normative level.
- using the CPD development and CCA/UNSDCF processes to ensure a broader-based recognition and introduction of MISP and GBViE into national frameworks across the region, based on data and evidence.
- using the Ukraine success with the COD-PS as a learning experience to develop a plan to address critical gaps in data linked to humanitarian crises and working across the HDP nexus through the regional programme.
- establishing a coordination mechanism for better exchange on national preparedness, resilience and adaptation among UNFPA country offices in the EECA region.
- writing up case studies and creating economic return-on-investment arguments for mobilizing more funding and financing for preparedness work, going beyond rights-based arguments (e.g., based on the Armenia good example).
- working with country offices to systematically include emergency preparedness considerations and actions in donor proposals - e.g., for training and repositioning.
- securing core resources to establish a strong and stable core regional humanitarian team that will allow UNFPA to further strengthen its position as a strong and reliable humanitarian actor in the region, including providing support for resource mobilization.

Derives from Findings 4, 6

Links to Conclusion 6

Targeted at: EECARO Humanitarian Specialist in collaboration with Population Development and Programme Coordination Advisors, under the leadership of EECARO senior management

Priority level: High

Recommendation 5. Building on its consistent technical expertise and support to date and in consideration of remaining challenges, EECARO should develop and implement a results-oriented regional strategy to solidify and consolidate UNFPA’s commitment to gender-transformative approaches. EECARO should ensure that the strategy

- aligns with the conceptual approach to gender equality and related transformations of the United Nations system.
- contains a clear definition of gender norms and social norms (either provided for at the global level and revised and adapted to the regional contexts or developed at the regional level).
- provides live examples of programming across different points of the gender scale - i.e. what is gender neutral and why; what is gender-responsive and why; and what is gender transformative and why.
- offers clear guidance on how normative gender-transformative support from UNFPA both aligns with, but in practical terms differs from that within the UN Women mandate - this should ideally be developed between UN Women and UNFPA in the region as a One United Nations approach.

Derives from Finding 1

Links to Conclusion 2

Targeted at: EECARO Gender Advisor in collaboration with other advisors and humanitarian staff

Priority level: Medium

Recommendation 6. Building on important work to date in the region and drawing upon the results of the ongoing global evaluation of UNFPA’s support of the leaving no one behind principle²³², EECARO should formulate a distinct LNOB strategy for the region. The LNOB strategy for Eastern Europe and Central Asia should:

- serve as an umbrella framework for integrating diverse funding sources, both core and non-core.
- define how data programming is necessary for LNOB programming but bring this to a more holistic level, outlining how UNFPA data work will contribute more broadly to the programmes of other United Nations agencies, government counterparts and other stakeholders.
- be fully inclusive of all regional left-behind groups, beyond those with disabilities, and with a strong focus on those left behind due to SRHR and gender characteristics, as aligns with UNFPA’s mandate, and despite political sensitivities, promoting the rights of these groups wherever possible.
- prominently feature UNFPA digital and other innovative partnerships and programme approaches, thus confirming that the relative marginalization and vulnerability of those left behind are not exacerbated.
- include a section linking LNOB to all megatrends, including specifically demographic shifts, climate change, migration (e.g., because of economic vulnerabilities) and digitalization. This section should highlight how these trends will affect who is most left behind and, to the degree possible, “future-proof” the strategy.

Derives from Findings 2, 4, 5, 7

Links to Conclusion 2

Targeted at: EECARO advisors in collaboration with humanitarian staff

Priority level: Medium

²³² Evaluation report expected early 2025.

Recommendation 7. EECARO should develop a region-specific innovation framework encompassing, but not limited to, digitalization. This framework should serve as a foundation for defining and fostering innovation and digital advancements within UNFPA's development and humanitarian programming at the regional level throughout 2026-2029, aligned to the forthcoming corporate Innovation Strategy. EECARO should do so through

- considering the recruitment of an innovation specialist.
- boosting regional partnership building for learning and co-creating innovative ideas and solutions.
- the consistent incorporation of innovation in resource mobilization proposals (including from the SIF).
- facilitating regular targeted information sharing among EECA country offices.
- the development and dissemination of regional knowledge products.

Derives from Findings 2, 3, 13

Links to Conclusions 2, 3

Targeted at: All advisors

Priority level: Low

5.3 Operational Recommendations

Recommendation 8. Within the framework of available funding, EECARO should exercise its competence to ensure adequate staffing at the regional and country levels is in place to enable effective programming during the forthcoming 2026-2029 regional programme cycle. In collaboration with UNFPA country offices, EECARO should formulate a multi-year human resources plan tailored to the region's needs and priorities. This would include:

- ensuring that the UNFPA Demographic Resilience Programme for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, including the underlying population data needs, is adequately staffed at the country level with the correct skills.
- a humanitarian action human resources plan that (i) is based on a clear understanding of the division of labour between EECARO, the new Programme Division in Nairobi and the Humanitarian Response Division (HRD) in Geneva; and (ii) clarifies roles and responsibilities within EECARO for supporting preparedness, resilience and adaptation and working across the nexus; and (iii) outlines how the regional office will ensure sustainability and added value of short-term humanitarian contracts.
- the development of a roster of qualified experts on European Union policies and acquis communautaire to advise UNFPA country offices and support countries on their paths to European integration and European Union membership.

Furthermore, **EECARO should develop actions to increase the recruitment of persons from left-behind groups** to meaningful and decision-making roles within the organization at country and regional levels and across different thematic areas, not just in terms of LNOB programming.

Derives from Findings 8, 15

Links to Conclusions 2, 5, 6

Targeted at: EECARO human resources staff in consultation with EECARO senior management

Priority level: Medium

Recommendation 9. EECARO should formulate a plan to implement the UNFPA Knowledge Management Strategy (2024-2030) within the EECA region. This would include:

- working with country office knowledge management focal points to facilitate access to knowledge products and organize more (in-person) events, including around relevant accelerators and strategic shifts, potentially including internal and external resource persons (from the region and beyond).
- contributing to and using the United Nations Europe and Central Asia Knowledge Management Hub created as part of the United Nations development system reform to disseminate UNFPA and access external knowledge products.

Derives from Findings 13, 14, 15

Links to Conclusions 2, 3, 4

Targeted at: EECARO advisors and humanitarian staff

Priority level: Medium