

Independent evaluation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025



UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office

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Foreword

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Strategic Plan 2022-2025 is the second in a series of three strategic plans intended to build a foundation for, then accelerate progress towards, achievement of three transformative results¹ (3TRs). Ultimately, UNFPA strategic plans are aimed at achieving the goal of universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and accelerating implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action. Although part of a series, the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 included a number of strategic shifts, as well as a set of six accelerators designed to scale up the achievement of the six strategic plan outputs² and, as a result, accelerate progress towards the 3TRs.

The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) assessed the organizational readiness and strategic positioning of UNFPA to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the 3TRs. This evaluation, which was included in the UNFPA quadrennial budgeted evaluation plan 2022-2025 also served to catalyse discussions on the design of the next strategic plan for 2026-2029.

The evaluation suggests that the series of strategic plans provided continuity for the organization but a continued emphasis on acceleration is needed. The focus on the 3TRs in the second strategic plan was effective but did not allow for recognition of the broader contributions by UNFPA to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ICPD Programme of Action. Guidance and strengthened capacities are needed to help UNFPA staff move across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

Recommendations to UNFPA include focusing the next strategic plan on further acceleration and protecting the UNFPA mandate; clarifying the positioning of UNFPA in population dynamics and other key areas of work (such as HIV, gender equality, youth and adolescents, ageing); clarifying and strengthening linkages between concepts necessary to operationalize acceleration, as well as enhancing capacities to undertake critical measures to support acceleration, such as normative work, shifting from funding to financing, knowledge management and strategic communications; and, promoting better integration of humanitarian-development and peace-responsive interventions in varied contexts.

As UNFPA begins the process of developing a new strategic plan, I trust that this evaluation will provide timely and useful insights.

Marco Segone

Director, Independent Evaluation Office
UNFPA

1 (1) Ending the unmet need for family planning, (2) ending preventable maternal deaths and (3) ending gender-based violence and harmful practices.

2 Strategic shifts, accelerators and outputs are explained in Section 2.

Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

3TR	Three transformative results	LNOB	Leave no one behind
AI	Artificial intelligence	QCPR	Quadrennial comprehensive policy review
AP	Asia and Pacific	RPE	Regional programme evaluation
APRO	Asia and Pacific Regional Office	SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
AS	Arab States	SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
ASRO	Arab States Regional Office	SSTC	South-South and triangular cooperation
CPD	Country programme document	UN	United Nations
EECA	Eastern Europe and Central Asia	UN WOMEN	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
EECARO	Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office	UNCT	United Nations Country Team
ESA	East and Southern Africa	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
ESARO	East and Southern Africa Regional Office	UNDS	United Nations Development System
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus	UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
HRBA	Human-rights based approach	UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development	UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
IEO	Independent Evaluation Office	UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group
IRRF	Integrated results and resources framework	WCA	West and Central Africa
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean	WCARO	West and Central Africa Regional Office
LACRO	Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office	WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

BACKGROUND

The UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 is the second in a series of three strategic plans intended to build a foundation for, then accelerate progress towards, achievement of three transformative results (3TRs). Ultimately, UNFPA strategic plans are aimed at achieving the goal of universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and accelerating implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action.

This formative evaluation is a milestone within an “evaluative evidence package” to inform the three UNFPA strategic plans mentioned above. The package is composed of several thematic and institutional centralized evaluations implemented under the last two quadrennial budgeted evaluation plans, a summative evaluation of the strategic plans scheduled in 2028, and this formative evaluation.

This independent evaluation was initiated shortly after the start of the internal Mid-Term Review of the Strategic Plan and Integrated Budget 2022-2025 (MTR) and efforts were made to create synergies and avoid duplication. Most importantly, the evaluation’s focus went beyond the examination of what changes occurred to accelerate progress towards UNFPA goals, to also examining the relevance of these changes and if they supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels.

The focus of the evaluation is on two sets of innovations introduced in the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. First, a series of six accelerators³ designed to scale up the achievement of the six strategic plan outputs and the progress toward the 3TRs. Second, 12 key strategic shifts⁴ that reflect the intention of UNFPA to adopt new ways of doing business in support of implementation of the plan. Some of these shifts were demonstrated in the reorganization of the strategic plan logical framework, others appeared in the organizational architecture adapted to accelerate the achievement of results or changes in approach on organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

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

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

PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The specific purpose of this evaluation is to provide evidence to support UNFPA learning related to what works (and what does not) to accelerate progress towards achievement of the transformative results and inform the design of the strategic plan for 2026-2029.

The primary intended users of the evaluation are: (i) UNFPA senior management; (ii) the Programme Division; (iii) the Humanitarian Response Division; (iv) the Division for Human Resources; (v) the Division for External Relations; (vi) other UNFPA business units at headquarters; (vii) UNFPA regional and country offices; and (viii) UNFPA Executive Board members and other Member States. The results of the evaluation should also be of interest to a wider group of stakeholders, including UNFPA partners and other United Nations entities.

The objective of this evaluation is to assess UNFPA organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate the progress towards the achievement of the 3TRs and catalyse a discussion on the design of the next strategic plan given the state of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The scope of the evaluation includes the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and its annexes. It covers the period from the start of 2022 until the end of data collection in mid-2024. The focus is on the new elements introduced in this strategic plan, namely, the six accelerators and the 12 strategic shifts. It covers UNFPA work at global, regional and country levels. A forward-looking perspective was maintained so that the evaluation findings benefit both the remainder of the current strategic plan period and the development of the subsequent plan. In so doing, the evaluation identifies where UNFPA can improve and highlights what has worked well.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The overall approach to the design of the evaluation stems from the set of four evaluation questions: (1) To what extent have the accelerators been relevant, operationalized and supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels? (2) To what extent have the strategic shifts made under the strategic plan supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels? (3) What are the enablers of strategic plan implementation and to what extent have they facilitated the acceleration and strategic shifts foreseen in the strategic plan? (4) To what extent is the conceptualization of the next strategic plan as “unfinished business” still relevant, given the state of progress towards the SDGs and 3TRs?

During the primary data collection process, the evaluation team visited six countries⁵ and conducted six country desk reviews,⁶ collected and analysed data from a range of primary and secondary sources, including more than 300 interviews at headquarters, regional and country levels, conducted a review of 100 key documents and an analysis of country programme documents (CPDs) using artificial intelligence (AI) tools, and developed “deep dive” studies into specific issues.⁷ Information was triangulated across multiple sources to ensure that it was consistent and accurate. Risks to the implementation of the evaluation identified during the inception period were adequately mitigated. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluations and Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation.

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

5 Bolivia, Botswana, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria and Türkiye.

6 Chad, Djibouti, El Salvador, Kyrgyzstan, South Sudan and Thailand.

7 Gender and social norms, the UNFPA normative role, moving from funding to financing the ICPD agenda, megatrends and knowledge management.

MAIN FINDINGS

Relevance, operationalization and implementation of the strategic plan accelerators

An examination of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 accelerators reveals a complex picture of their implementation and effectiveness. While the six accelerators are inherently relevant due to the flexibility given to country offices in choosing the most appropriate ones, their suitability may not be relevant in contexts regressing from the 3TRs. This flexibility allows for adaptation to local contexts, but also raises concerns about the universal applicability of the accelerator approach, particularly in areas facing pushback against the UNFPA core mission.

The evaluation identified inconsistent guidance provided for operationalizing the accelerators. This inconsistency is evident in how accelerators are presented within the strategic plan itself and between the plan and its programming guidance. The strategic plan and related programming materials need enhanced coherence in explaining how to effectively implement these approaches to ensure consistent application across the organization.

The quality and timeliness of technical guidance vary considerably across different accelerators. While some accelerators were supported with clear guidance (like leave no one behind), others (notably on data and evidence, digitalization and innovation, and the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) approach) need comprehensive direction. This disparity in guidance quality correlates with country offices' knowledge and implementation of the accelerators. For instance, while 54 per cent of UNFPA office personnel report being very knowledgeable about the focus on "leaving no one behind", only 18 per cent feel the same about the resilience, adaptation and humanitarian-development-peace accelerator.

Despite these challenges, country offices have largely integrated accelerators into new CPDs. The evaluation notes that newer elements introduced in the strategic plan have found less adherence than the longer-established approaches used by UNFPA. Accelerators like human rights-based approaches, leaving no one behind, and data and evidence, show higher levels of operationalization compared to South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC), partnerships and financing, resilience and innovation and digitalization.

Regional offices are playing a crucial role in addressing these challenges by contextualizing the approach and supporting the operationalization of accelerators. They are often instrumental in tailoring corporate guidance to specific contexts and supporting the adoption of accelerators through multi-country programmes. For example, some regional offices have developed context-specific strategies on innovation and digitalization, while others have created acceleration papers contextualizing strategies for various aspects of UNFPA work.

The development of new CPDs is an opportunity for country offices to realign their structure and the skills needed to implement new programmes and move away from "business as usual." This process allows offices to reconsider their approach, develop new theories of change and revise their organizational structure to better support the implementation of accelerators. For instance, some country offices have reorganized into integrated teams specifically designed to foster innovation, strategic communications and partnerships.

Relevance, operationalization and implementation of the strategic shifts

The strategic shifts are relevant despite being a mix of different types of actions and having overlap with five of the six accelerators. Many of the shifts have significant potential to enhance acceleration towards the 3TRs. Expanding humanitarian response capacity is particularly important given increasing UNFPA expenditure in this area. However, the operationalization of shifts related to leveraging and advocacy such as UNFPA normative work and ICPD financing, has been somewhat hampered by a lack of timely guidance and capacity building initiatives. The integration of megatrends into programming represents a new concept for UNFPA and has seen limited operationalization to date. Nevertheless, it is receiving growing attention, with recent steps to analyse trends affecting ICPD commitments. UNFPA has made substantial efforts to strengthen its humanitarian response capacity, but this work requires specific skills distinct from the normative and advocacy abilities needed for the upstream acceleration agenda.

In line with UN reform, UNFPA has fully aligned its CPDs with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs) and actively engages in joint programmes. However, many shifts and accelerators, such as gender social norms, necessitate a more coherent approach with other UN entities to maximize impact.

An analysis of CPDs indicates that UNFPA country offices have increased emphasis on all strategic shifts. Further efforts are needed to operationalize them, including defining the normative role of UNFPA, clarifying the distinction between “funding” and “financing”, and supporting normative work with funds and programmatic efforts in a context of shrinking resources.

The role of enablers in supporting the operationalization and implementation of strategic plan accelerators and strategic shifts

The evaluation identified several key enablers for the strategic plan’s implementation, focusing on knowledge management, strategic communication, the business model and human resources. These enablers vary in their effectiveness in facilitating operationalization and implementation of the accelerators and strategic shifts.

Knowledge management is recognized as a critical thread connecting many actions that will accelerate progress towards the 3TRs, particularly in the organization’s normative role. However, effective knowledge management remains a challenge for UNFPA. While some strong knowledge management initiatives exist at global and regional levels, they are often driven by different projects, units, or individuals, lacking coherence and wider benefit. In response, UNFPA has developed a new Knowledge Management Strategy, approved in March 2024, which aims to enhance knowledge availability, boost generation and dissemination, strengthen institutional arrangements and leverage technological advancements.

While strategic communication is crucial for strengthening advocacy efforts and is a core part of the acceleration agenda, it has yet to reach its full potential. The current communication strategy is outdated, and there is a lack of clear definition and guidance on implementing “strategic” communication.

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

Small country offices face specific challenges in implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts, including constraints on structures, human resources and budgets. These offices, which represent 39 per cent of UNFPA country presence, often require greater support from regional offices. Some innovative solutions are being employed to address these challenges, such as the establishment of a middle-income country (MIC) hub in East and Southern Africa and the development of strategic partnerships with academic institutions and think tanks.

The forward-looking perspective

At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) implementation, most SDGs are unlikely to be met by 2030. The SDG report from 2023 indicated that half of the assessable targets show moderate or severe deviations from the desired trajectory, with over 30 per cent experiencing no progress or regression below the 2015 baseline. Similarly, progress in implementing the ICPD Programme of Action has been uneven, and considerable acceleration is still needed to achieve the 3TRs. Research by UNFPA reveals significant regional differences in progress and highlights the substantial acceleration required to meet these targets in some regions.

While the series of three consecutive strategic plans was initially a good approach for consistency and long-term thinking, recent global changes have altered the context. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global economic crisis have likely exacerbated the challenges in achieving the SDGs and 3TRs. As a result, the next strategic plan can no longer be viewed merely as unfinished business as originally envisioned.

The evaluation found that, while acceleration is at the core of the strategic plan, the focus is primarily on six accelerators related to strategic plan outputs. Approaches for other critical elements for acceleration, such as strategic shifts and enablers like knowledge management and strategic communication, are spread throughout the strategic plan document without a cohesive strategy to bring them together.

UNFPA has made concerted efforts to strengthen its humanitarian response capacity. Humanitarian work requires specific capacities, which are distinct from the influencing and advocacy skills that the upstream acceleration agenda requires, with implications for UNFPA internal capacity development efforts and priorities.

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

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion 1: Successive strategic plans aiming for the 3TRs provided continuity and focus but require adaptability, with acceleration remaining relevant yet potentially insufficient for countries facing setbacks.

Despite some long-term improvements, recent data reveal uneven progress towards the SDGs, the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, and the achievement of the 3TRs, and in some cases reversal. Increasing pushback on the ICPD agenda has had consequences for progress towards the achievement of the 3TRs and associated goals. In many countries, targets are progressing too slowly and considerable acceleration is still needed to achieve the 3TRs.

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

There is no overall acceleration agenda that explicitly brings together various elements, such as advocacy, strategic communication, knowledge brokering, financing and partnerships, in a strategic manner.

Recommendation 1: Within the overarching framework of contributing to the progress towards the 3TRs, ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs, focus the next strategic plan on further acceleration and ensure that efforts to protect the ICPD agenda are fully integrated into the approach.

Conclusion 2: The 3TRs effectively focused UNFPA resources on key priorities, but they do not fully encompass all stakeholder needs or the organization's broader contributions to SDGs and the ICPD Programme of Action.

UNFPA focus on the 3TRs as corporate outcomes has brought clarity to the organization's priorities. However, this focus makes it challenging to capture the direct contributions of core parts of UNFPA work to the broader ICPD agenda and the SDGs, particularly in the areas of population dynamics, gender equality, HIV and youth.

While the 3TRs remain relevant across the organization, some regions have identified additional priorities that are not fully captured by the current strategic plan, such as ending HIV transmission in East and Southern Africa, to better reflect regional priorities. In addition, UNFPA work on demography is valued by the wider United Nations in the delivery of the SDGs beyond those to which UNFPA directly contributes. Other areas that contribute directly to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs include UNFPA work in gender equality, HIV, youth and adolescence and aging. While all these areas contribute to the 3TRs, their contribution directly to the ICPD Programme of Action and SDGs may be greater and is not being captured, measured or reported on.

The overall strategic plan's theory of change does not capture these direct contributions but shows that all contributions to the ICPD Programme of Action and SDGs go through the 3TRs. This points to a structural issue in the theory of change of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025, where some outputs (such as work on gender and social norms, population change and data, and adolescents and youth) have a direct influence on the ICPD and SDG goals beyond the three transformative results.

At the same time the importance of the 3TRs, in terms of the distance from achieving them, as well as the strategies required to achieve them, varies significantly across regions. Equally, demand from national governments also varies significantly. While there are examples of regions adapting corporate strategies and messaging to meet regional needs, some regions still face challenges in this respect.

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

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

The scope of a strategic plan inevitably results in a degree of complexity and there is a need for its many parts to be clear, consistent and coherent. This was largely achieved but not totally, with a number of areas not meeting the required levels of coherence or clarity. Within the overall strategic framework, the process of operationalizing the plan also faced similar challenges. While the huge organizational effort that went into the development of the strategic plan should be acknowledged, operationalization efforts inevitably take time and need to be planned well in advance.

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

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

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

All the strategic shifts are relevant, with some having the potential to greatly accelerate progress on the 3TRs. While the shifts related to leveraging and influencing normative work and ICPD financing are not new concepts, they constitute a change in emphasis and direction. As a result, new or improved strategies, guidance and efforts aimed at changing mindsets and building individual capacity were required, but some were missing or developed only recently.

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

Small country offices face specific challenges in implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts due to constraints in structures, human resources and budget. These offices often have scaled-down versions of larger office structures, with staff "double-hatting" responsibilities and taking on multiple focal point roles. The focus is often still on project delivery, with less emphasis on the upstream work required by the strategic shifts. Moreover, regional offices, which are expected to provide greater support to small country offices, often appear overstretched.

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

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

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

Despite the clear evidence of increased humanitarian response capacity, there are only scattered examples of successful experiences with resilience and operating within the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Lack of comprehensive corporate guidance on integrating the resilience and humanitarian-development-peace approach accelerator into UNFPA programming is an important gap. Even though efforts to make progress with the humanitarian-development-peace approach have been made, as triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, issuing a corporate strategy is still pending.

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

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

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Young girls in the West Bank attend a UNFPA-supported youth summer camp to gain life skills.



1

INTRODUCTION

This report is organized into five sections:

Section 1 introduces the subject of the evaluation as well as its scope, purpose and objectives.

Section 2 provides the context through an overview of strategic planning in UNFPA and the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 itself.

Section 3 provides an overview of the methodology used.

Section 4 presents the findings of the evaluation. For each of the four evaluation questions, a list of relevant findings is presented with the analysis and evidence collected through the evaluation process.

Section 5 presents conclusions drawn from the findings and then recommendations based on those findings and conclusions.

This introductory chapter sets out the background to the evaluation as well as its rationale, purpose, objectives and scope. In so doing, it establishes the framework from which the rest of the evaluation was designed. It also provides a brief overview of the evaluation process.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE EVALUATION

The UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 is the second in a series of three strategic plans intended to build a foundation for, then accelerate progress towards, achievement of three transformative results⁸ (3TRs). Ultimately, UNFPA's strategic plans are aimed at achieving the goal of universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights and accelerating implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action. Although part of a series, the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 included a number of strategic shifts, as well as a set of six accelerators designed to scale up the achievement of the six strategic plan outputs⁹ and, as a result, accelerate progress towards the 3TRs.

The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) commissioned this formative evaluation of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 to assess UNFPA's organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the 3TRs. This evaluation, which was included in the UNFPA Quadrennial Budgeted Evaluation Plan 2022-2025,¹⁰ also

8 (1) Ending the unmet need for family planning, (2) ending preventable maternal deaths and (3) ending gender-based violence and harmful practices.

9 Strategic shifts, accelerators and outputs are explained in Section 2.

10 DP/FPA/2022/1: The evaluation was not originally in the Evaluation Office workplan but was added at the request of UNFPA senior management and Member States.

serves to catalyse discussions on the design of the next strategic plan given the current state of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 3TRs.

This formative evaluation is a milestone within an “evaluative evidence package” to inform the three UNFPA strategic plans mentioned above. The package is composed of several thematic and institutional centralized evaluations implemented under the last two quadrennial budgeted evaluation plans, a summative evaluation of the strategic plans scheduled in 2028, and this formative evaluation.

This independent evaluation was initiated shortly after the start of the internal mid-term review of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and its integrated budget and efforts were made to create synergies and avoid duplication. Most importantly, the evaluation’s focus went beyond the examination of what changes occurred to accelerate progress towards UNFPA goals, to also examining the relevance of these changes and if they supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels.

In addition, the evaluation was conducted in a coordinated manner with the evaluations of the six UNFPA regional programmes,¹¹ focusing on the linkages to country and global levels in support of the implementation of the strategic plan. This approach aimed to avoid duplication, create synergies and increase efficiency.

1.2 PURPOSE, OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

Evaluation at UNFPA serves three main purposes: (a) to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders on performance in achieving development results and on invested resources; (b) to support evidence-based decision-making; and (c) to contribute key lessons learned to the existing knowledge base on how to accelerate implementation of the Programme of Action of the ICPD.

The specific purpose of this evaluation was Included in the terms of reference (Annex 1) and is to provide evidence to support UNFPA’s learning related to what works (and what does not) to accelerate progress towards achievement of the transformative results and inform the design of the strategic plan for 2026-2029 and its stated intent to focus on “unfinished business”.¹²

The primary intended users of the evaluation are therefore: (i) UNFPA senior management; (ii) the Programme Division;¹³ (iii) the Humanitarian Response Division; (iv) the Division for Human Resources; (v) the Division for External Relations;¹⁴ (vi) other UNFPA business units at headquarters; (vii) UNFPA regional and country offices; and (viii) UNFPA Executive Board members and other Member States. The results of the evaluation should also be of interest to a wider group of stakeholders, including other United Nations entities.

The objective of this evaluation is to assess UNFPA’s organizational readiness and strategic positioning to accelerate the progress towards the achievement of the 3TRs and catalyse a discussion on the design of the next strategic plan given the state of progress on the SDGs.¹⁵

The scope of the evaluation includes the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and its annexes. It covers the period from the start of 2022 until the end of data collection in mid-2024. The focus is on the new elements introduced in this strategic plan, namely, the six accelerators for change and the 12 strategic shifts that were proposed, including flexibility and agility in programming, financing, innovation and partnerships (more detail is presented in Section 2). It covers UNFPA’s work at global, regional and country levels. A forward-looking perspective was maintained so that the evaluation results benefit both the remainder of the current strategic plan and the development of the subsequent one. In so doing, the evaluation aims to identify where UNFPA can improve and highlight what has worked well.

11 The six regional programmes were evaluated separately by each regional office but in coordination with this evaluation.

12 Work on the design of the 2026-2029 strategic plan formally started after the presentation of the mid-term review of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 to the annual session of the Executive Board in June 2024.

13 Formed in August 2024 from the merger of the Policy and Strategy Division and the Technical Division.

14 Formed in August 2024 from the integration of the Intergovernmental, Inter-Agency and Policy Dialogue Branch into the Division of Communications and Strategic Partnerships.

15 From the terms of reference (paragraph 20 of the full version).

1.3 THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The evaluation questions (Table 1) were developed based on the list provided in the evaluation terms of reference and adjusted following discussions in the inception period. They cover the strategic plan accelerators, strategic shifts and broad issues that may have enabled or hindered their operationalization. The final evaluation question looks towards the next strategic plan and how UNFPA should be positioned in the period leading to 2030.

TABLE 1: Four key evaluation questions

Accelerators
Evaluation question 1: To what extent have the accelerators been relevant, operationalized and supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels?
Strategic shifts
Evaluation question 2: To what extent have the strategic shifts ¹⁶ made under the strategic plan supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels?
Enablers
Evaluation question 3: What are the enablers of strategic plan implementation and to what extent have they facilitated the acceleration and strategic shifts foreseen in the strategic plan?
Forward looking perspective
Evaluation question 4: To what extent is the conceptualization of the next strategic plan as “unfinished business” still relevant, given the state of progress towards the SDGs and 3TRs?

Source: Inception report.

1.4 OVERVIEW OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The data collection phase of the evaluation started in January 2024 following approval of the inception report by the Director of the Independent Evaluation Office. After analysis and synthesis of data collected (see Section 3.4 for details), emerging findings and conclusions were discussed with the evaluation reference group (see Annex 2 for details) and UNFPA senior management before a first draft of the report was prepared. The draft report was subsequently discussed with the evaluation reference group in a workshop to co-create the evaluation recommendations with the evaluation team. The final evaluation report was submitted to the Independent Evaluation Office by the evaluation team in September 2024. The evaluation is presented to the UNFPA Executive Board at the first regular session in 2025 along with the management response.¹⁷

¹⁶ Of the 12 strategic shifts, there are four that fully overlap with the accelerators (see Table 3). This evaluation question will assess the remaining eight strategic shifts.

¹⁷ Formally, the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Office for Project Services.



© UNFPA Bangladesh/Peter Rozario.

Two women return home after receiving basic dignity kits from UNFPA at a cyclone shelter in Mongla, Bangladesh.

2

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This chapter briefly describes strategic planning in UNFPA and the series of UNFPA strategic plans, including the current one. Overall, it sets the background for understanding the methodology and approach of the evaluation. Annex 3 provides more detail, including an analysis of the changes between recent and ongoing strategic plans.

2.1 STRATEGIC PLANNING IN UNFPA

United Nations General Assembly resolutions on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (QCPR) of operational activities for development of the United Nations system establish guidelines for operational activities for a four-year period. In the resolution, the General Assembly requests the entities of the United Nations development system to ensure that their strategic plans are “consistent with and guided by [its] provisions”¹⁸ UNFPA, like other United Nations entities, produces a four-year strategic plan in the year after the approval of the QCPR.

Using the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) time span, UNFPA designed its Strategic Plan 2018-2021 to be the first of three consecutive strategic plans that are meant to contribute cumulatively to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (see Figure 1). Throughout the period of its three strategic plans, UNFPA will monitor the 17 UNFPA-prioritized Sustainable Development Goal indicators.¹⁹

FIGURE 1: *The three consecutive UNFPA strategic plans leading to 2030*²⁰



The first two strategic plans in this series (2018-2021 and 2022-2025) are aligned with General Assembly resolution 70/1 on the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These strategic plans also responded to other global frameworks underpinning the 2030 Agenda, including:

¹⁸ Operative paragraph 79 QCPR 2016.

¹⁹ UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021 Annex 1. Integrated results and resources framework.

²⁰ Presentation to the Executive Board on the roadmap to the strategic plan, August 2020.

- the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 of the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction;²¹
- the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change;²² and
- 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development.²³

These two strategic plans are fully aligned with the ICPD and include the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action as one of the overall goals of the organization. The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 also builds on the momentum from the 25th anniversary of the ICPD that calls for an acceleration of the ICPD Programme of Action.

The strategic plans include an integrated results and resources framework (IRRF), which articulates the results that UNFPA expects to achieve during the strategic plan period. It also defines the indicators, baselines and targets for measuring progress towards those results and assessing the strategic plans' effectiveness and impact. The IRRF, therefore, supports the accountability of UNFPA to its stakeholders as well as providing learning for the organization.

The business model is another core annex that defines where and how UNFPA will implement its strategic plan. It also presents the resource allocation and distribution system. Recent strategic plans have also included a theory of change that underlies the results articulated in the strategic plan and addressed why and how change happens in the context of the plan. To do so it presents a holistic view of the causal and enabling conditions that must be in place to achieve the 3TRs.

The UNFPA global programme and six regional programmes are also annexes of the strategic plans. The purpose of these programmes is to complement country programmes, ensuring a comprehensive approach to promote the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda across all levels. They also support intergovernmental and regional processes in advancing the implementation of global and regional commitments through data-informed policy dialogue and advocacy.

The integrated budget is a separate document that underpins the strategic plans and their results and covers the same period. It is UNFPA's overarching financial plan and encompasses all the cost categories as well as providing the link between the results and resources of the organization within a single, integrated financial framework.

The annual report of the Executive Director is used to monitor implementation and, to the extent possible, results of the strategic plan, largely using the integrated results and resources framework. In the second year of implementation a mid-term review is undertaken, and its findings are incorporated into the annual report. This is the first time the strategic plan has been evaluated²⁴ but regional programmes have been evaluated in the past. There has been no similar evaluation for the global programme.

2.2 THE UNFPA STRATEGIC PLAN 2022-2025

The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 was developed in a consultative manner. In August 2020, an interdivisional working group was established and, in October, 12 task teams were set up to work on strategically important issues that required broad consultation. The strategic plan starts by reaffirming the relevance of the current strategic direction of UNFPA with the 3TRs at the heart of UNFPA's work.²⁵ Recognizing the setbacks resulting from recent global events, COVID-19 in particular, the current strategic plan identifies a series of key strategic shifts that are required to accelerate progress towards the 3TRs. Key elements in the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 logical framework also include the definition of six interconnected outputs and the identification of six accelerators. The number of outcomes was reduced from four in the previous strategic plan to three, representing the 3TRs.

21 <https://www.undrr.org/publication/sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030>.

22 <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/paris-agreement>.

23 <https://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffd3/index.html>.

24 There was an [evaluation of the architecture supporting the operationalization of the UNFPA Strategic Plan](#) completed in 2017.

25 UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Summary.

Strategic shifts

The 12 key strategic shifts are listed in Box 1 of the strategic plan document and presented in Table 2 below. They reflect UNFPA's intention to adopt new ways of doing business in support of Strategic Plan 2022-2025 implementation. Some of these shifts are demonstrated in the reorganization of the strategic plan logical framework, others appear in the organizational architecture adapted to accelerate the achievement of results or changes in approach on organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

The strategic shifts are a mix of different types of actions and overlap with five of the six accelerators,²⁶ four wholly and one partially (see Table 3). Many shifts are not pitched at the strategic level while others are not shifts in the sense that they were already an important part of UNFPA's work. Further categorization of the shifts as: (I) programmatic; (II) externally influenced; and (III) related to influencing or leveraging, will be discussed in the findings section. The category of each strategic shift is indicated in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Key strategic shifts of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025

Programmatic shifts	Externally influenced shifts
Aligning the organizational focus on achieving the three transformative results	Tailoring programmatic and technical assistance to better respond to local contexts through a country office-led process, "within the United Nations family on the ground"
Integrating the effects of megatrends , such as climate change, demographic shifts, inequalities and digitalization, into programming	Increasing the focus on joint accountability, in line with United Nations reforms, principles and practices
Increasing the focus on "populations left behind" , and emphasizing "reaching those furthest behind first"	Influencing or leveraging shifts
Expanding the humanitarian response capacity to better safeguard the lives of women, adolescents and youth, especially adolescent girls, while also addressing mental health and psychosocial issues	Scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services , as part of universal health coverage plans
Mainstreaming resilience, prevention, preparedness and early action , and emphasizing the complementarity between humanitarian, development and peace-responsive interventions	Strengthening the UNFPA normative role in all countries where UNFPA is present
Incorporating the multisectoral needs of women, adolescents and youth, and addressing structural inequalities, such as discriminatory gender and social norms , that hinder the achievement of transformative results	Shifting the focus from funding the ICPD agenda to financing the ICPD agenda
Reinvigorating and expanding partnerships , including those with the private sector, civil society organizations, international financial institutions, academia and media, as well as partnerships through South-South and triangular cooperation	

Source: UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 Box 1; categorization by the evaluation team.

26 The "data and evidence" accelerator is the only one where there is no overlap with the strategic shifts.

The accelerators

The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 goes beyond the list of principles included in the previous strategic plan by identifying six accelerators (presented in Table 3 below) designed to scale up the achievement of the six strategic plan outputs²⁷ and, ultimately, the progress toward the 3TRs. In addition to being listed in the narrative section of the strategic plan, a table in Annex 2, Section VIII of the plan shows how each accelerator can be applied using specific programme strategies to achieve the strategic plan outputs.

TABLE 3: Accelerators and related strategic shifts

Accelerators	Related strategic shifts from Table 2
a. Human rights-based and gender transformative approaches	Incorporating the multisectoral needs of women, adolescents and youth and addressing structural inequalities, such as discriminatory gender and social norms, which hinder the achievement of transformative results
b. Innovation and digitalization (partial overlap related to digitalization)	Integrating the effects of megatrends, such as climate change, demographic shifts, inequalities and digitalization, into programming
c. Partnership, South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) and financing	Reinvigorating and expanding partnerships, including those with the private sector, civil society organizations, international financial institutions, academia and media, as well as partnerships through South-South and triangular cooperation
d. Data and evidence	
e. “Leaving no one behind” (LNOB) and “reaching the furthest left behind first”	Increasing the focus on “populations left behind” and emphasizing “reaching those furthest behind first”
f. Resilience and adaptation and complementarity among development, humanitarian and peace-responsive efforts	Mainstreaming resilience, prevention, preparedness and early action and emphasizing the complementarity between humanitarian, development and peace-responsive interventions

Source: UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 paragraph 45; evaluation team.

Preparing for implementation

To ensure a systematic roll-out of the strategic plan and equip all organization units with the necessary guidance, tools and systems, and capacities to implement the strategic plan, UNFPA prepared a 100-day plan of critical actions for the roll-out²⁸ (representing the time between the approval of the strategic plan on 31 August 2021 and the start of its implementation on 1 January 2022).

27 The six output areas are: (i) policy and accountability; (ii) quality of care and services output; (iii) gender and social norms output; (iv) population change output; (v) humanitarian action output; and (vi) adolescents and youth output.

28 UNFPA. Undated. 100-Day plan to support the implementation of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

© UNFPA Ethiopia/MOPIX Production.

Shakira, a survivor of female genital mutilation, works to bring awareness about the harmful practice to her community with support from the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation.



3

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the overall approach to the evaluation and sets out a framework for understanding the 12 strategic shifts and the six accelerators listed in the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. It also briefly describes the data collection strategy and approach to analysis and synthesis, as well as the limitation of the evaluation. More detail on the approach and methodology can be found in Annex 4.

3.1 OVERALL APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION

The overall approach to the design of the evaluation stems from the evaluation questions set out in the previous chapter. The design of the evaluation follows United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation in the United Nations system²⁹ and abides by UNEG Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct³⁰ and any other relevant ethical codes. To meet the requirements of the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP), the evaluation adheres to the UNEG gender-related norms and standards (Norm 8³¹ and Standard 4.7³²). The evaluation followed the principles of gender-responsive evaluations by incorporating a systematic approach to the analysis, as appropriate for this type of evaluation. In addition, the evaluation included a specific deep dive on gender and social norms. More broadly, it is aligned with the standards set out in the UNFPA Evaluation Quality Assurance and Assessment system, which also includes cross-cutting principles, such as disability inclusion, leaving no one behind and social and environmental standards.³³

The evaluation examined the organizational readiness or capacity of UNFPA to undertake the series of strategic shifts that were intended to increase its contribution to the 3TRs, as well as that of other stakeholders, and ultimately accelerate progress towards them and relevant SDGs. The evaluation did not assess this contribution nor use a theory of change that tested the associated assumptions in a model. Rather, it was based on the macro-level assumption that the strategic and programmatic shifts would result in an increased contribution by UNFPA while recognizing that some may be more relevant than others. As its title suggests, the evaluation took a formative approach, focused on learning and informing the development of the new strategic plan.

29 UNEG Norms and Standards for evaluation (2016) <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914>.

30 UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation (2020) <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/2866>.

31 "The universally recognized values and principles of human rights and gender equality need to be integrated into all stages of an evaluation. It is the responsibility of evaluators and evaluation managers to ensure that these values are respected, addressed and promoted, underpinning the commitment to the principle of 'no-one left behind'."

32 "The evaluation design should include considerations of the extent to which the United Nations system's commitment to the human-rights based approach and gender mainstreaming strategy was incorporated in the design of the evaluation subject."

33 Guidance on evaluation quality assurance and assessment: Towards excellence in evaluation. <https://www.unfpa.org/admin-resource/guidance-evaluation-quality-assurance-and-assessment>.

The evaluation incorporated additional elements that influenced this overall approach:

- It drew on existing evidence – specifically, building on the mid-term review of Strategic Plan 2022-2025.
- It coordinated and collaborated with the six regional programme evaluations being conducted at the same time.
- It included aspects of a developmental approach with feedback to stakeholders during the evaluation process.
- It leveraged artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse country programme documents (CPDs) in the data collection phase.

3.2 THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework was developed by the evaluation team to better understand and learn from the accelerators and strategic shifts, their relevance, operationalization and use to enhance programming. The framework sets out three lines of inquiry (derived from the questions on accelerators in the evaluation terms of reference) that were applied to the assessment of the accelerators and strategic shifts:

- Relevance of strategic shifts and accelerators;
- Operationalization of strategic shifts and accelerators; and
- Enhanced programming through implementation of strategic shifts and accelerators.

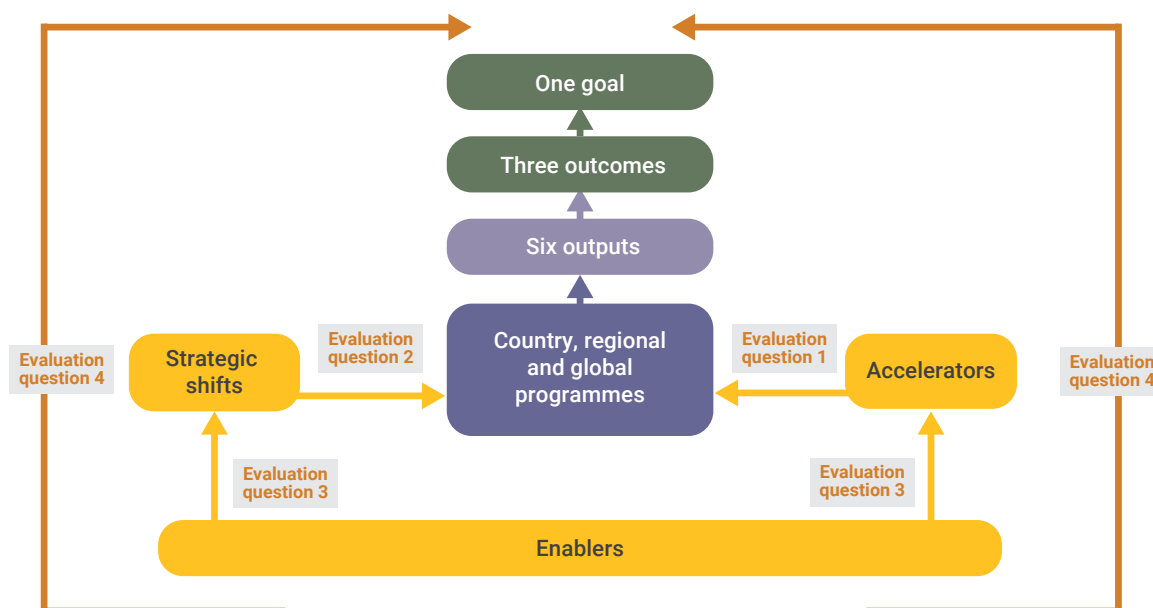
Enablers

The terms of reference for this evaluation identified two “enablers”– strategic communication and human resource management – that would enable the operationalization of the strategic shifts and accelerators. During the inception phase, two other enablers were added – knowledge management³⁴ and the business model more broadly (knowledge management is one of the modes of engagement identified in the business model).

Bringing the strategic shifts, accelerators and enablers together

Figure 2 demonstrates how the strategic shifts, accelerators and enablers are intended to interact with the programming process to enhance the delivery of results. Surrounding all of this is the strategic plan itself. Figure 2 also indicates how the evaluation questions (see Table 1) fit into the framework.

FIGURE 2: The overall analytical framework for the evaluation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025



Source: Evaluation team.

34 Knowledge management goes beyond the “data and evidence” accelerator as defined in Annex 2 of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 on change stories. It is about creating, sharing, using and managing the knowledge and information of an organization.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

A variety of data collection methods was used to obtain the evidence from which the evaluation findings were developed. Table 4 contains an overview, and a more detailed description can be found in Annex 4. The initial set of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis tools was developed from the evaluation terms of reference and informed by the evaluability assessment. The evaluation matrix (Annex 5) was used to identify the specific tools for answering each evaluation sub-question.

TABLE 4: *Elements of the data collection strategy*

Data collection cluster	Results				
Desk reviews	<p>Over 100 documents from UNFPA, United Nations and external sources were reviewed. This included the evidence collected by the mid-term review team. See Annex 6 for a full list.</p> <p>Artificial intelligence was used to examine the set of country programme documents approved in parallel with or since the start of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. More details can be found in Annex 7.</p>				
Key informant interviews	Over 60 key stakeholder interviews were conducted at UNFPA headquarters and regional levels, as well as interviews with external informants within the UN system. ³⁵ A total of 168 women and 135 men were interviewed. See Annex 8 for a full list.				
Deep dives	<p>Five subjects were covered, comprising a combination of topics: (a) of critical importance for UNFPA; (b) identified by the mid-term review as challenges; and (c) that have not been covered to a large degree by other sources of evidence (for example, evaluations). The subjects were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender and social norms; • UNFPA normative role; • Moving from funding to financing the ICPD agenda; • Megatrends; and • Knowledge management. 				
Country level studies	<p>More detailed studies undertaken in 12 countries (six were conducted in-person and six remotely) with over 200 stakeholders interviewed.³⁶</p> <table border="0"> <thead> <tr> <th>In-person country studies</th> <th>Remote country studies</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bolivia • Botswana • Morocco • Nepal • Nigeria • Türkiye </td> <td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chad • Djibouti • El Salvador • Kyrgyzstan • South Sudan • Thailand </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	In-person country studies	Remote country studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bolivia • Botswana • Morocco • Nepal • Nigeria • Türkiye 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chad • Djibouti • El Salvador • Kyrgyzstan • South Sudan • Thailand
In-person country studies	Remote country studies				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bolivia • Botswana • Morocco • Nepal • Nigeria • Türkiye 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chad • Djibouti • El Salvador • Kyrgyzstan • South Sudan • Thailand 				
Regional programme evaluations	A review of evidence from the six regional programme evaluations being conducted at the same time as the strategic plan evaluation. Two complete reports were used and for the remaining regions, initial findings were considered.				

Source: Evaluation team.

³⁵ A request for written feedback to two questions from Executive Board members was made and two responses were received.

³⁶ These country studies were not full case studies. Information on the selection criteria and process can be found in Annex 4.

3.4 ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

The evaluation matrix represents the single framework for analysis and synthesis of the data collected. Data were analysed for each assumption and indicator, and triangulation was used to ensure the validity of data analysed. Based on the structure of the evaluation matrix, an evidence table was developed so that the quality and quantity of evidence for each sub-question could be monitored. The evaluation matrix also served as the framework for recording interview notes and reviewing documents and data.

The evaluation matrix includes 14 sub-questions across four evaluation questions. The sub-questions were the unit of analysis and the basis for developing the initial set of evaluation findings. These initial findings were split or combined as appropriate. Findings were grouped by evaluation question in the evaluation report.

The evaluation team also analysed evidence by differentiated contexts, including business model tiers, income levels, vulnerability and humanitarian response. In this way, efforts were made to identify patterns and specific findings for different contexts where possible and appropriate.

A five-day synthesis workshop brought together the evaluation team and the Independent Evaluation Office evaluation manager to discuss the evidence gathered and collate the various strands of data. The objective was to help the evaluation team deepen its analysis with a view to identifying the evaluation findings, main conclusions and related recommendations.

3.5 LIMITATIONS

Of the implementation risks identified in the inception period, most were adequately mitigated. Coordination with the mid-term review occurred as information was shared by the mid-term review team on a timely basis and fed into the strategic plan evaluation process. The risks associated with using AI were largely mitigated by identifying the shortcomings and developing an approach to use the evidence in the most ethical and responsible manner.

The availability of key stakeholders did not present a major challenge. Although there has been a continuous engagement with UNFPA management, especially through the various rounds of comments and discussion with the evaluation reference group and senior management, the envisaged developmental aspects of the evaluation through more regular feedback mechanisms did not occur as often as expected. Nonetheless, the evaluation reporting phase benefited from several events and individual meetings to get feedback from key UNFPA stakeholders and influence early thinking on the new strategic plan.

This evaluation was only able to make full use of one draft report and four evidence tables from regional programme evaluations (RPEs) by the data synthesis phase. While this has been useful to inform the strategic plan evaluation findings, evidence from different regions has varied and was not included to the same extent as a result. The final revision of this report in September 2024 includes a review of all regional programme evaluations.



© UNFPA Ukraine/Serhii Korovayny.

A Ukrainian family celebrates the first birthday of their daughter, born in a UNFPA-supported hospital.

4

FINDINGS

This findings chapter is structured by the four questions the evaluation set out to answer. The findings themselves were developed through the data collection and analysis processes described in the previous section. For each evaluation question a summary is provided that represents the overall response to the question.

4.1 RELEVANCE, OPERATIONALIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION³⁷ OF THE SIX ACCELERATORS

Evaluation question 1: To what extent have the accelerators been relevant, operationalized and supported advanced programming at global, regional and country levels?

Overall response

The accelerators proposed by the strategic plan are inherently relevant because of the flexibility given to country offices to choose those that are the most appropriate, but they may not be the most appropriate in contexts regressing from the 3TRs. Guidance on operationalizing them has been inconsistent, with the quality and timeliness of technical guidance varying across accelerators and some lacking comprehensive direction. Regional offices play a key role in contextualizing the approach. Although country offices have largely integrated accelerators into new country programme documents (CPDs), full implementation will take time. The evaluation highlights the need for clearer guidance, capacity-building and structural realignment to fully leverage the accelerators to achieve UNFPA's strategic goals.

The identification of accelerators to enhance UNFPA performance is one of the changes introduced in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. The six accelerators (human rights-based and gender-transformative approaches; innovation and digitalization; partnership, South-South and triangular cooperation and financing; data and evidence; leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first; and resilience and adaptation and complementarity among development, humanitarian and peace-responsive efforts) are part of UNFPA's effort to move away from "business as usual" and support the achievement of the six interconnected outputs and, ultimately, stimulate progress towards the 3TRs.

³⁷ For the purposes of the evaluation, implementation refers to programming, in this case using the accelerators or strategic shifts. Operationalization refers to the enabling environment for enhanced programming (including resources, leadership), institutional capacity (including guidance, knowledge, processes, mechanisms, systems, etc.) and individual capabilities and incentives.

Finding 1: Flexibility in selection of the six accelerators and related programming strategies means that the approach is intrinsically relevant. However, the accelerator approach may not be relevant in contexts regressing from the 3TRs and associated goals, where UNFPA is facing challenges in protecting and advancing its mandate.

The six accelerators are largely aligned with the priorities set by the QCPR. Approved amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 QCPR emphasizes the importance of working towards sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery. Beyond recovery, the QCPR also calls upon United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) entities to foster climate and disaster resilience. It has introduced new priorities for the system regarding leveraging digital technologies and fostering digital inclusion, as well as a renewed focus on innovative funding and financing schemes.³⁸

The strategic plan and its annexes note the flexibility of country offices to adopt the accelerators according to their local context, as well as to identify additional context-specific accelerators.³⁹ However, the strategic-plan-related guidance is based on the rationale that CPDs should be applying the specific set of accelerators identified in the strategic plan: there is no comprehensive guidance on how to identify other context-specific accelerators and flexibility is framed as the possibility of using one or a combination of the six accelerators identified in the Strategic Plan 2022-2025.⁴⁰ Moreover, three out of the six accelerators are included as criteria for the country programme review and approval process, under the dimension of “programming principles”. While this aligns CPDs with UNSDCF development guidance,⁴¹ it also implies limited flexibility as the absence of those accelerators in country programme documents leads to a lower rating from the quality assurance process.⁴²

It is also worth noting that Annex 2 of the strategic plan, entitled “Change stories’ to accelerate the achievement of the three transformative results”, includes a list of specific programme strategies for each accelerator by output, adding to more than 150 strategies. Given the novelty of the approach, compounded by the limited guidance on how to identify accelerators, the list has provided country offices with a useful shortcut to incorporate the strategic plan accelerators into their CPDs.

The accelerators have been largely incorporated into UNFPA programming, and qualitative evidence from regional programme evaluations and country studies points to the overall relevance of all of them, albeit with some variation according to specific contexts.⁴³ In particular, increasing pushback on UNFPA’s mandate has been underscored across regions as a key hindering factor to the achievement of the 3TRs and associated goals. In the contexts where this pushback is occurring, avoiding setbacks and further regression is most pressing and evidence from country-level studies and regional programme evaluations indicates that country offices are facing challenges in protecting and advancing UNFPA’s mandate. In those contexts, whether the concept of “acceleration”, the set of proposed accelerators and their related programme strategies, are sufficient is not entirely clear. Although the strategic plan acknowledges this challenge under “UNFPA operational environment risks”, the mitigation strategies are not thoroughly articulated. This raises a question about the relevance of a “universal” set of accelerators and programming strategies.

38 QCPR 2016 A/RES/71/243; QCPR 2020 A/RES/75/233.

39 UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. July 2021; UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 2 “Change stories” to accelerate the achievement of the three transformative results; UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 3 Business model.

40 UNFPA guidance note for aligning country programmes to the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. November 2021; UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 Implementation Toolkit. December 2021.

41 United Nations Sustainable Development Group, United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework – Internal Guidance. June 2019.

42 UNFPA country programme review and approval guidance note. Programme review committee resource kit for country programmes under the Strategic Plan 2022–2025. March 2022. The accelerators incorporated as criteria are: LNOB, human rights-based approach (HRBA), and resilience, adaptation and humanitarian-development-peace continuum.

43 For example, the Arab States (AS) and East and Southern Africa (ESA) RPEs question the relevance of the gender transformative and human rights-based approaches in their regions.

Finding 2: The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and its annexes, as well as related programming guidance, are not always consistent or clear about the most effective way to operationalize the accelerators.

While some of the accelerators are not new approaches to UNFPA, as they were already being addressed as programming approaches or modes of engagement (for example, human rights-based approach (HRBA), leaving no one behind (LNOB), humanitarian-development-peace, partnerships, South-South and triangular cooperation), the novelty lies in framing them as accelerators that should be articulated within country programmes' theories of change with the purpose of scaling up results. Other accelerators constitute elements that may have existed but are now more visible and better articulated in the strategic plan (for example, gender-transformative approaches, innovation and digitalization, financing, and resilience and adaptation). In both cases, several inconsistencies in the way accelerators are presented within the same strategic plan and between the strategic plan and its programming guidance can be found.

In the strategic plan, inconsistencies are found in how the concept of accelerators is presented and how they should be integrated into programming.⁴⁴ For example, the strategic plan document links accelerators to achieving six interconnected outputs under the "six plus six" framework, with programming strategies outlined for each accelerator in relation to each output (see Annex 2 of the strategic plan). Conversely, the business model annex and the strategic plan implementation toolkit⁴⁵ depict accelerators as enhancing the performance and effectiveness of the modes of engagement but lack a clear explanation of their precise relationship. Additionally, the implementation toolkit references some of the accelerators under "organization, effectiveness and efficiency", as necessary changes to make the organization fit-for-purpose. While reiterating the importance of accelerators across various components of UNFPA programming has been useful to emphasize their priority within the organization, the lack of a cohesive explanation linking these references together hampers clarity regarding the precise role of accelerators in programming.

Inconsistencies are also found in the strategic-plan-related programming guidance, echoing qualitative perceptions raised by the country studies and regional programme evaluations that accelerators are, in fact, programming approaches, with some being operationalized somewhat independently of their framing as accelerators. For example, in some contexts the accelerating nature of leaving no one behind is challenged (for example, with respect to cost efficiency),⁴⁶ while recognizing that it is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda and represents a core commitment. The policy and procedures for development and approval of the country programme document (July 2022) frames part of the accelerators as key programming principles.⁴⁷ However, lack of clarity on the distinction between applying those approaches as accelerators to create a leverage effect or as rights-based principles hinders strategic programming.

There was some attempt at ensuring alignment between strategic plan accelerators and thematic guidance that may also include strategies for acceleration. For example, the UNFPA acceleration plan for ending the unmet need for family planning 2022–2025,⁴⁸ includes 18 priority actions to help focus country office efforts to accelerate progress in line with the family planning strategy. Each priority action is followed by a set of programmatic options for country offices to consider when designing workplans and explicit reference is made to the list of accelerators included in the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Similarly, the 2023 UNFPA strategy for promoting gender equality and the rights of women and adolescent girls states that it is aligned with the six strategic plan outputs and accelerators. In neither case did the evaluation team conduct an in-depth analysis to see what alignment meant in practice.

While the different ways of presenting the accelerators might not present contradictions nor be mutually exclusive, the fragmented way the accelerators are presented, and the myriad concepts and strategies related to them is causing confusion and hinders cohesive understanding and coherent implementation across the organization. Additionally, considering that the accelerators are not entirely new approaches to UNFPA, such fragmentation in conceptualization and guidance hampers a clear understanding of the new corporate expectations.

44 The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 is composed of one main document and four annexes: (1) Integrated results and resources framework; (2) "Change stories" to accelerate the achievement of the transformative results; (3) Business model and (4) Global and regional programmes.

45 The Strategic Plan Implementation Toolkit aimed to help align UNFPA's global, regional and country programmes and thematic strategies and action plans with the new strategic plan.

46 Asia and Pacific RPE.

47 Along with gender equality and women's empowerment, sustainability, accountability and an integrated and multidimensional programming approach. UNFPA. Policies and Procedures Manual. Policy and procedures for development and approval of the country programme document. July 2022.

48 Operational guide to the UNFPA Strategy for Family Planning.

Finding 3: The technical guidance for each accelerator is not of the same quality and gaps in some areas have constrained their implementation.

At the time that the strategic plan was approved, guidance existed for some, but not all, accelerators.⁴⁹ Comprehensive guidance strategically designed to support the integration of accelerators into programming was only fully available for leaving no one behind, the sole accelerator not comprised of multiple elements.⁵⁰ Partial guidance existed for two other accelerators: the human-rights-based approach, the gender-transformative approach and partnerships; and South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) and financing. Human-rights-based approach guidance has been available since 2020, while conceptual and practical guidance for the gender-transformative approach were released later, in 2022 and 2023.⁵¹ Similarly, guidance on SSTC was available from the start of the strategic plan,⁵² but guidance for other elements of this accelerator was developed progressively: a corporate framework for strategic partnerships and a strategy for engagement with civil society organizations and parliamentarians were launched in 2022, the UNFPA Strategy for Mobilizing Resources and Finances was introduced in 2023, and guidance for the financing aspect of this accelerator only became available in 2024.⁵³

To date, there is no comprehensive corporate guidance on integrating three of the accelerators – namely, data and evidence, digitalization and innovation, and resilience and the humanitarian-development-peace approach – into UNFPA programming. Although the development of corporate strategies for those accelerators is underway, existing guidance remains either outdated or scattered, focusing on specific issues and not providing strategic direction on integration into programming. Despite this, there have been corporate efforts to foster the implementation of the accelerators. For example, a roadmap on mainstreaming innovation was implemented, and an Innovation Unit was established at headquarters – both within the 100-day strategic plan roll-out period.⁵⁴ Additionally, regional clinics were organized to assess region-specific demands and opportunities. The Population Data Portal was launched in 2022, updated in 2023, and country-level pilots were implemented to establish a clear path of integrating data from the portal into CPDs.⁵⁵ The Strategic Investment Facility has provided seed funding and technical support to unlock additional financial resources to 40 countries by the end of 2023.⁵⁶

An important gap remains for the accelerator on “resilience and adaptation, and complementarity among development, humanitarian and peace-responsive efforts”. Despite efforts to advance the humanitarian-development-peace approach

49 For the purpose of this analysis, we have considered as guidance those strategic and technical documents that outline the organization’s vision and priorities, and provide technical guidance, including capacity development opportunities on relevant subjects.

50 LNOB operation plan and related guidance was available by September 2021 (LNOB 2 pager, frequently asked questions, furthest behind factors prioritization tool, case studies), while the Guidance note for applying a human rights-based approach to programming in UNFPA was available in 2020.

51 UNFPA. 2020. Guidance note for applying a human rights-based approach to programming in UNFPA.; UNFPA. May 2022. Guidance note on integrating the gender and social norms output into country programme documents; UNFPA. February 2023. Gender Strategy.

52 The guidance note on South-South and triangular cooperation in programming dates back from 2018 and was updated by the UNFPA Corporate Strategy on South-South and Triangular Cooperation 2022-2025, from 2022. Additionally, to support regional programmes and CPD indicators development, in June 2021, a document with a proposal for SSTC indicators was available (Strategic and operational indicators for South-South and Triangular cooperation).

53 UNFPA. November 2022. UNFPA’s Strategic Partnership Framework 2022-2025; UNFPA. 2022. UNFPA engagement strategy for civil society organizations and parliamentarians; UNFPA. 2023. Mobilizing resources and finances to achieve the three transformative results in the Decade of Action; UNFPA. March 2024. Financing the ICPD Agenda: Implementing the Strategic Plan’s Shift from Funding to Financing 2022-2025.

54 To ensure a systematic roll-out of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025, and equip all organization units with the necessary guidance, tools, systems and capacities to implement the strategic plan, UNFPA has prepared a 100-day plan of critical actions for the roll-out (i.e. covering the period from the approval of the plan to the start of its implementation).

55 MyUNFPA. The new UNFPA Population Data Portal is launched and available to you! April 25, 2022; MyUNFPA. UNFPA Technical Division presents Population Data Portal 2.0. May 4, 2023.

56 Annex 5. Implementation, in 2023, of General Assembly resolution 75/233 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system. Progress in implementing the UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2022-2025.

triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, issuing a corporate strategy is still pending.⁵⁷ While the intersection between resilience and humanitarian, development and peace is clear, the strategic plan calls for strengthening resilience to cope with a broader range of crises and vulnerabilities, including climate change, natural disasters and health-related epidemics. Some regional offices, in particular Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (EECARO), have prioritized preparedness and resilience in countries in the region, and there have been good examples of working across the nexus, but this reflects effective national systems and donor flexibility in allowing humanitarian funding to be used for systems strengthening, and has been driven by the context rather than the strategic plan.⁵⁸ The recent evaluation of UNFPA organizational resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic underscored several areas for improvement, but implementation of responses to the majority of the recommendations, which include increasing UNFPA capacity to strengthen resilience in key mandate areas and operationalizing the humanitarian-development-peace approach to improve resilience, will only take place between 2025 and 2026.⁵⁹

Although corporate guidance documents are crucial for articulating organizational priorities and technical advice, they are not the sole means of equipping the organization with the necessary capacities to integrate and operationalize accelerators (and shifts). For all accelerators, there has been a wealth of online learning and capacity development opportunities that complements the written guidance accessible to staff. However, there is also a prevalent “guidance fatigue,” particularly at the country level, with country offices feeling overwhelmed while simultaneously expecting more practical and context-specific support.⁶⁰

The mid-term review survey data indicate a correlation between the existence, timeliness and quality of corporate guidance and country offices’ knowledge of the accelerator. As shown in Figure 3, the mid-term review survey found that while 54 per cent of UNFPA offices’ personnel report being very knowledgeable about the focus on leaving no one behind, for which a comprehensive package of guidance was in place right at the start of strategic plan implementation, this figure drops to 18 per cent on the resilience, adaptation and humanitarian-development-peace accelerator. For the SSTC, partnerships and financing accelerator, for which guidance has been partially available, the figure is 30 per cent.

Contextualization is crucial to support the effective roll-out of technical guidance and regional offices are often playing an important role in supporting operationalization of the accelerator approach, including tailoring corporate guidance to specific contexts. East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) and Arab States Regional Office (ASRO) have invested efforts in developing context-specific strategies on innovation and digitalization.⁶¹ West and Central Africa Regional Office (WCARO) has recently developed a series of eight acceleration papers, contextualizing strategies for the 3TRs, innovation, data, demographic dividend, humanitarian response and strategic foresight. Regional office-led multi-country programmes are also often instrumental in supporting the adoption of the accelerators. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), for example, the regional office has proactively supported gender-transformative programming, developing, piloting and rolling out the implementation of a methodology for systematically applying a gender-transformative lens and addressing social and gender norms at the country level.

57 UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office. 2024. Formative evaluation of the organizational resilience of UNFPA in light of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic; Asia-Pacific Regional Programme Evaluation draft report (May 2024) and Regional Programme Evaluations initial findings for AS and WCA.

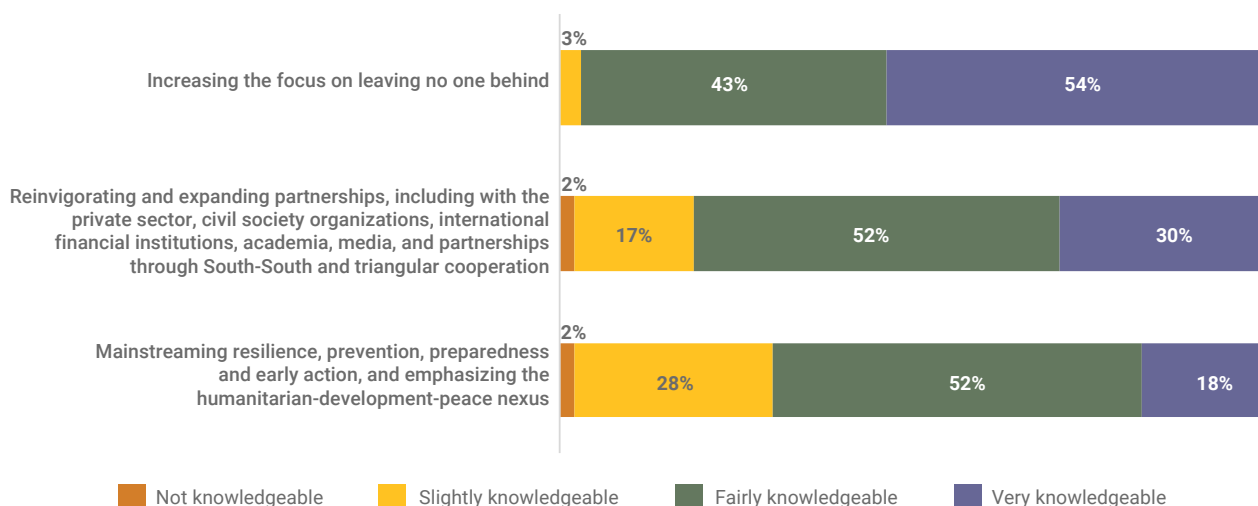
58 EECA RPE.

59 UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office. 2024. Formative evaluation of the organizational resilience of UNFPA in light of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and UNFPA management response to the formative evaluation of the organizational resilience of UNFPA in light of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic* (DP/FPA/2024/CRP.4)

60 Country-level studies for this evaluation and Asia Pacific Regional Programme evaluation draft report.

61 UNFPA. N/d. East and Southern Africa Innovation and Digital Transformation Strategy. UNFPA Arab States Regional Office. Imagine, Invent, Impact! Innovation in the Arab region 2024-2025. Draft.

FIGURE 3: Office personnel's level of knowledge on accelerators⁶²



Source: Strategic Plan 2022-2025 mid-term review survey. Question 2 'On a scale of 1 to 4, what is your office personnel's level of knowledge of the strategic plan and its main elements/processes?'

Finding 4: Although country offices have largely integrated the accelerator approach through the development of new CPDs, full implementation is a gradual process and will take some time to complete, which will have implications on the country offices' ability to accelerate effectively.

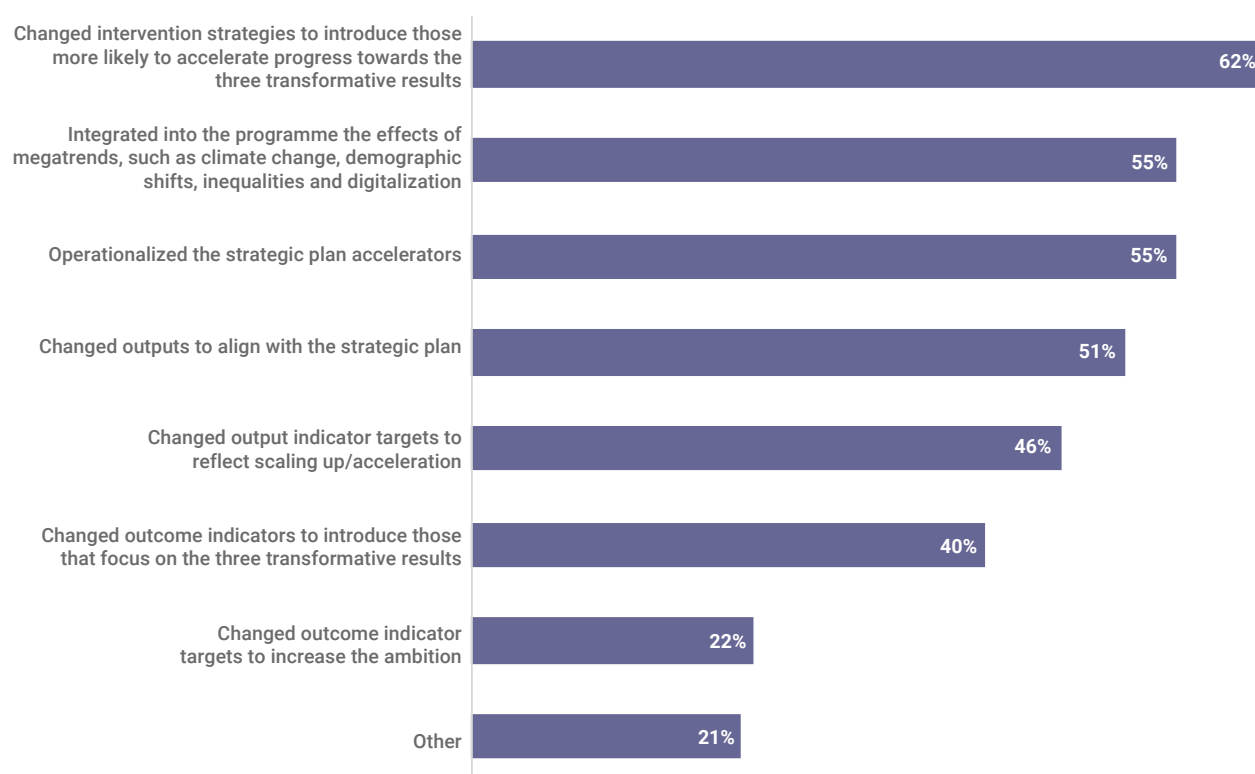
While the accelerators are largely core programming principles and many of the associated programming strategies are not new, the CPDs approved during strategic plan development, or after its approval, show increased emphasis on the accelerator approach proposed by the strategic plan. The AI-generated analysis of 75 CPDs approved at the same time as or immediately following the strategic plan approval in 2022 identified an increased emphasis and alignment across all accelerators subvariables in more than 90 per cent of the new CPDs. However, despite the formal integration of the accelerator approach in the CPD documents, this has yet to translate into concrete implementation.

Considering the universe of 115 country offices that participated in the mid-term review survey, 55 per cent of them reported having introduced changes in their CPD in order to operationalize the accelerators (Figure 4). It is worth noting that around 35 per cent of UNFPA country programmes were approved before September 2021, when discussions around the new strategic plan were sufficiently advanced to inform country processes. The realignment process recommended for country programmes ending in 2023 was to update the IRRF, "if necessary and feasible."⁶³ In fact, many countries have only introduced minor changes in their IRRF. When comparing the types of changes introduced in the CPDs, a change of interventions strategies has been the most common one with 62 per cent of country offices having reported it. In total, 40 per cent reported having changed outcome indicators to focus on the three transformative results and only 22 per cent reported changing outcome indicators to increase ambition.⁶⁴

62 The mid-term review question 2 did not assess office personnel's knowledge on the other three accelerators.

63 UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 Implementation Toolkit. December 2021.

64 Q4. What changes has your office made to the country programme to strengthen its focus on accelerating the achievement of the three transformative results? Note: Question not applicable to regional offices (Select all that apply).

FIGURE 4: Changes made to the country programme

Source: Strategic Plan 2022-2025 mid-term review Survey. Question 4 'Q4. What changes has your office made to the country programme to strengthen its focus on accelerating the achievement of the three transformative results?'

Accordingly, the implementation of accelerators is better reflected at the intervention level, though not without nuances. The general trend from the mid-term review data shows that the newer elements introduced in the strategic plan have found less adherence than UNFPA's longer-established approaches (Figure 5). While the HRBA, LNOB, and data and evidence accelerators are reported as having been used by almost 90 per cent of offices, the other three accelerators – SSTC, partnerships and financing, innovation and digitalization, resilience and humanitarian-development-peace – show a considerably lower level of operationalization at 50 per cent.⁶⁵ This trend also reinforces finding 3, above, on the correlation between existing corporate guidance and the understanding needed to implement the accelerators. The "data and evidence" accelerator is an outlier, as no corporate guidance has been issued for it. However, several factors contribute to UNFPA personnel's familiarity with it, including its status as a long-standing programming approach, its overlap with the "population change and data" output, and the fact that "data" was a separate outcome in the previous strategic plan.

65 Q11. On a scale of 1 to 4, to what extent did your office use the strategic plan accelerators to boost programme interventions?

FIGURE 5: Office utilization of strategic plan accelerators to boost programme interventions



Source: Strategic Plan 2022-2025 mid-term review survey. Question 11 'On a scale of 1 to 4, to what extent did your office use the strategic plan accelerators to boost programme interventions?'

Country-level studies conducted for this evaluation show that the process of developing a new CPD provides an opportunity to fully consider and introduce the accelerator pathways: starting with an in-depth process of analysis, strategic dialogue and planning, including the development of a theory of change; then, the development of a resource mobilization, partnership and SSTC plan; and the revision of country offices' organogram. As such, the development of a new CPD also provides the opportunity for offices to realign their structure, including developing the skills needed to implement new programmes and move away from doing "business as usual" (see Section 4.3 on the enablers). In El Salvador, for example, to operationalize the changes proposed by the new CPD, the country office reorganized into three integrated teams: technical, operations and accelerator. The accelerator team is responsible for fostering innovation, strategic communications and partnerships.

4.2 RELEVANCE, OPERATIONALIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGIC SHIFTS

Evaluation question 2: To what extent have the strategic shifts⁶⁶ made under the strategic plan supported enhanced programming at global, regional and country levels?

Overall response

Using the 3TRs as corporate outcomes has focused UNFPA but does not capture contributions to UNFPA's broader mandate. The strategic shifts are relevant, with some having the potential to greatly accelerate progress on the 3TRs. However, new or improved strategies, guidance and capacity-building are needed to support the shifts. Megatrends have limited operationalization so far. UNFPA has positioned its humanitarian response capacity and aligned CPDs with UNSDCFs with increased emphasis on the strategic shifts in CPDs.

The strategic shifts were introduced as new ways of doing business in support of strategic plan implementation. While presented as a set of shifts, they are, as shown in Table 2, a mix of shifts that can be characterized as: programmatic; externally driven; and related to influencing and leveraging.

Finding 5: Using the 3TRs as corporate outcomes has focused the organization but makes it difficult to capture the contributions of core parts of UNFPA's work to the broader ICPD agenda and the SDGs.

As noted above, this strategic plan is the second in a series of three that span the period up to 2030. This approach was intended to bring continuity in UNFPA's focus. The 3TRs in Strategic Plan 2022-2025 are set out in Table 5 below, along with the outcomes of Strategic Plan 2018-2021.

TABLE 5: *The three transformative results and the outcomes of Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and Strategic Plan 2018-2021*

Three transformative results	Outcomes of Strategic Plan 2022-2025	Outcomes of Strategic Plan 2018-2021
Ending the unmet need for family planning	Outcome 1: By 2025, the reduction in the unmet need for family planning has accelerated	Outcome 1. Every woman, adolescent and youth everywhere, especially those furthest behind, has utilized integrated sexual and reproductive health services and exercised reproductive rights, free of coercion, discrimination and violence
Ending preventable maternal deaths	Outcome 2: By 2025, the reduction of preventable maternal deaths has accelerated	Outcome 2: Every adolescent and youth, in particular adolescent girls, is empowered to have access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, in all contexts

66 Of the 12 strategic shifts, there are 4 that fully overlap with the accelerators (see Box 2). This evaluation question will assess the remaining 8 strategic shifts: aligning the organizational focus on achieving the three transformative results; integrating the effects of megatrends, such as climate change, demographic shifts, inequalities and digitalization, into programming; scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services, as part of universal health coverage plans; expanding the humanitarian response capacity to better safeguard the lives of women, adolescents and youth, especially adolescent girls, while also addressing mental health and psychosocial issues; tailoring programmatic and technical assistance to better respond to local contexts through a country office-led process, "within the United Nations family on the ground"; strengthening the UNFPA normative role in all countries where UNFPA is present; shifting the focus from funding the ICPD agenda to financing the ICPD agenda; and increasing the focus on joint accountability, in line with United Nations reforms, principles and practices.

Three transformative results	Outcomes of Strategic Plan 2022-2025	Outcomes of Strategic Plan 2018-2021
Ending gender-based violence and harmful practices	Outcome 3: By 2025, the reduction in gender-based violence and harmful practices has accelerated	Outcome 3: Gender equality, the empowerment of all women and girls, and reproductive rights are advanced in development and humanitarian settings
		Outcome 4: Everyone, everywhere, is counted, and accounted for, in the pursuit of sustainable development

While Strategic Plan 2018-2021 maintained four outcome-level results from the Strategic Plan 2014-2017, it also referred to the 3TRs as an organizing principle, with an outcome on population dynamics as the foundation for the other three outcomes.^{67,68} The goal of the two strategic plans has remained the same: to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive rights and accelerate implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action.

Country studies conducted for this evaluation, the regional programme evaluations and the mid-term review have all shown there is appreciation within UNFPA for the clear focus provided by the 3TRs. Despite changes in nomenclature from the three zeros (which is still referenced in many documents) to the 3TRs,⁶⁹ this consistency of focus over the two strategic plans has been useful and the 3TRs remain relevant across the organization. Countries have reported that aligning the organizational focus on the 3TRs has provided greater clarity to teams regarding targeted programming efforts, has contributed to breaking silos and has supported communication.

Box 1: UNFPA's evolution into the sexual and reproductive rights agency

The UNFPA Strategic Plan 2014-2017 introduced the “bullseye”, a concept summarizing the UNFPA goal of universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, reduced maternal mortality and accelerated progress on the ICPD agenda. This goal was intended to improve the lives of women, adolescents and youth and is enabled by human rights, gender equality and population dynamics. The bullseye concept links population data to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Within this time period, UNFPA rebranded itself to external stakeholders as a sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) agency rather than a population and development agency, even although the shift in focus was not intended to downplay UNFPA's role in this broad area of work.

Source: UNFPA Evaluation Office: *Evaluation of UNFPA support to population dynamics and data*. 2023.

However, in some regions, there are questions as to whether these are the only relevant results. This can be seen clearly in the East and Southern Africa regional programme, which adopted a “3+1 approach” and included a fourth result on ending sexual transmission of HIV given the significance of the issue in the region, which accounts for more than half the number of people in the world living with HIV despite being home to only 8 per cent of the world's population. EECARO has led the organization in work on demographic resilience, strengthening the capacity of countries in the region to respond to demographic trends, including ageing, low fertility and out-migration. Countries in Asia and Pacific (AP) and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) regions also face similar demographic trends and are focusing on population dynamics and its effects on services and social protection systems as a result.

These regional initiatives respond to the demands of countries to understand better the effects of population dynamics. At the same time, there is concern that the visibility of UNFPA's work in this area through its “headline” results may affect the organization's ability to respond to these demands in the future. This was identified in the Asia and Pacific, Eastern Europe

67 More details of the evolution of the outcomes (and other components) of the three strategic plans can be found in Annex 3.

68 UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021 (DP/FPA/2017/9) page 7.

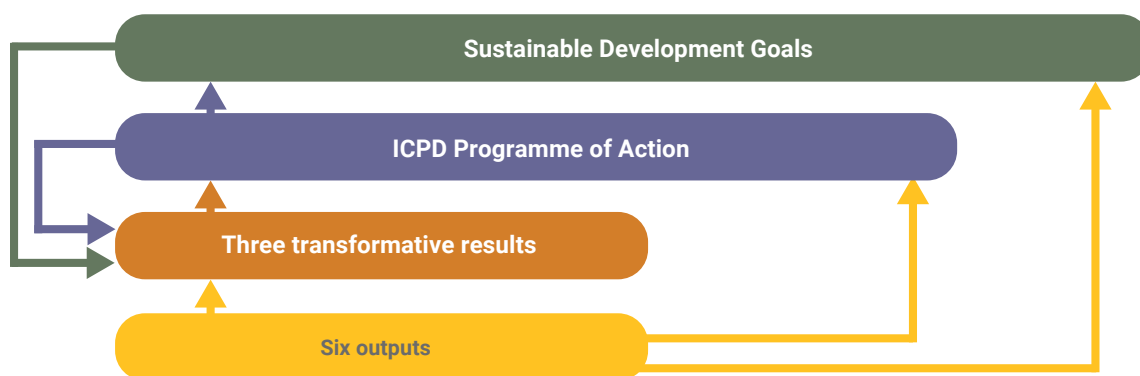
69 The three zeros present the same idea as the 3TRs in a different way. For example: three zeros – zero preventable maternal deaths; 3TRs – ending preventable maternal deaths.

and Central Asia, East and Southern Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean regional programme evaluations and by key informants regarding not only population dynamics but also other issues of concern, including HIV and adolescents and youth. A previous evaluation on UNFPA HIV work⁷⁰ concluded that, following changes in results between the 2014-2017 and 2018-2021 strategic plans without a clear HIV result or a clear HIV strategy, human and financial resources were reduced and UNFPA's ability to shape the global agenda was limited.

The recent evaluation on population dynamics was clear that UNFPA's role and contribution to work in this area is still valued at country, regional and global levels but concluded that UNFPA does not clearly link its work on population data with analysis of population dynamics and, ultimately, population and development. With demographic shifts receiving more attention globally, the evaluation recommended that UNFPA "develop a bold population and development strategy reconceptualized around the data, dynamics and development continuum and including demographic dividends, resilience and policy."⁷¹ UNFPA recently hosted a global dialogue on demographic diversity, one of three such dialogues to mark the 30th anniversary of the ICPD (the others focus on youth and technological change). This suggests a renewed level of attention to demography within the organization.

Country studies undertaken for this evaluation reconfirmed that UNFPA's work on demography is valued by the wider United Nations in the delivery of the SDGs beyond those to which UNFPA contributes. This points to a structural shortcoming in the theory of change of the strategic plan, which proposes that the six outputs of the strategic plan contribute to the 3TRs, which in turn contribute to the ICPD Programme of Action and subsequently the SDGs. While the results chain may be clear for some of the outputs (policy and accountability, quality of services and humanitarian action), for others, the relationship is less direct and has much more direct influence on the ICPD and SDG goals: work on gender and social norms, on population change and data and on adolescents and youth has broader relevance beyond the 3TRs (see Figure 6). Population change and data, in particular, is a strong comparative advantage for UNFPA within the UN Country Team. The lack of visibility of the critical contributions these areas make will also affect the ability of UNFPA to raise resources to fund necessary activities.

FIGURE 6: Contribution of outputs directly to the ICPD Programme of Action and the Sustainable Development Goals



Source: Evaluation team analysis.

The issue of UNFPA's contribution beyond the 3TRs is not only relevant for work in population and development but also in areas such as gender, HIV and youth. Although the 2019 UNFPA Strategy on Adolescents and Youth – My Body, My Life, My World – is focused on supporting achievement of the 3TRs, largely through the “My Body” component,⁷² the other two components have a broader scope. Specifically, “My Life” aims to “address determinants of health and well-being of adolescents and youth, upholding rights and investing in human capital”, while “My World” promotes the “leadership of

70 UNFPA Evaluation Office. 2020. Evaluation of the UNFPA support to the HIV response (2016-2019).

71 UNFPA Evaluation Office. 2023. Evaluation of UNFPA support to population dynamics and data. Recommendation 1, p91.

72 UNFPA. 2019. My Body: ensure access to integrated sexual and reproductive health services and information for all adolescents and youth.

adolescents and youth and their fundamental right to participate in sustainable development, humanitarian action and sustaining peace". Equally, while activities undertaken within the UNFPA Gender Strategy 2022-2025 are supporting the creation of an enabling environment that is essential for the achievement of the 3TRs, they are also contributing to the ICPD Programme of Action and SDGs more directly. For example, the strategy includes an "enabler" aimed at promoting equitable social and gender norms to advance women's and adolescent girls' agency and decision-making.

Finding 6: Beyond the focus on the 3TRs, the remaining shifts are relevant, and some have the potential to enhance acceleration towards the 3TRs (such as normative work and ICPD financing). Expanding humanitarian response capacity is especially relevant in an organization that currently commits such a large part of its expenditure to humanitarian assistance.

Beyond the shift to align the organizational focus on achieving the 3TRs, the remaining seven strategic shifts considered in the evaluation encompass: i) shifts in how UNFPA is programming directly (integrating the effects of megatrends, expanding humanitarian response); ii) externally-driven shifts (tailoring to local contexts, increasing the focus on joint accountability); and, iii) shifts that reflect how UNFPA aims to effect results through influencing and leveraging (scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive services through universal health packages, shifting the focus from funding to financing and strengthening UNFPA's normative role).

Relevance of programming shifts

The evaluation found that the shifts in programming are relevant to UNFPA's mandate. Of the five megatrends identified in the strategic plan, one of them – demographic shifts – is central to UNFPA's work as the lead UN agency on population dynamics. Although questions around ageing may appear to be recent, UNFPA supported research on this issue as long ago as 2002.⁷³ The effects of climate change were noted in the Strategic Plan 2018-2021 (in particular, in the Common chapter), although at that time there was no specific reference to adapting programming to address these effects. The megatrend of "inequality" is closely related to the commitment by the UN system to "leave no one behind", making this inherently relevant to UNFPA's work. More broadly, the concept of megatrends is highly relevant, but the specific megatrends noted in the strategic plan represent only some of the trends that will affect acceleration in different contexts. Findings from the regional programme evaluations⁷⁴ noted that UNFPA will need to be more adaptive in its response to megatrends as they emerge, and that some of these phenomena should not be seen as temporary "trends" but rather enduring realities. (See finding 8 below for further discussion on megatrends).

In the context of increasing conflict and other emergencies, expanding humanitarian capacity is strategically relevant, in terms of both UNFPA capacity and its support to partners in enhancing their humanitarian capacity. UNFPA's expenditure on humanitarian action continues to rise, in both absolute and relative terms, reaching \$671 million or 51.8 per cent of total programme expenses in 2023.⁷⁵ Much of this funding is under the category of "other resources", earmarked to address specific crises. This is reflected in the substantial increases in humanitarian expenditure in some regions in response to particular crises – Asia and Pacific and the Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions especially⁷⁶ – but does not negate the relevance of humanitarian action in all other regions. The Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office confirmed an increase in its humanitarian capacity to respond to a number of crises in the region beyond Ukraine. The regional programme evaluations also found increases in humanitarian capacity across all regions; however, despite the relevance of this shift, short-term earmarked funding has implications for UNFPA's ability to enhance its own response capacity, particularly in protracted crises.⁷⁷

73 UNFPA Population and development strategies series number 5: Population ageing and development. Operational challenges in developing countries 2002.

74 Regional programme evaluation final draft report for AS, AP and LAC.

75 UNFPA annual report of the Executive Director statistical and financial review, 2023 (DP/FPA/2024/4 (Part I/Add.1)).

76 UNFPA statistical and financial review 2023 (DP/FPA/2024/4 (Part I/Add.1)) notes increased spending particularly in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Pakistan and Ukraine.

77 Regional programme evaluations.

Relevance of externally driven shifts

As part of the broader UN system, strategic shifts that are driven by the strategic direction of Member States and by reforms of the system lead to a stronger emphasis on tailoring programmes to local contexts and increased joint accountability, which are highly relevant to UNFPA's work and acceleration.⁷⁸

The formative evaluation of the UNFPA engagement in the reform of the United Nations development system (2022) notes that the reform has reaffirmed UNFPA's mandate and improved its ability to deliver on the 2030 Agenda. This reform is helping UNFPA clarify its role and reduce competition at the country level, though more support from headquarters and regional offices is needed. Independent resident coordinators and cooperation frameworks are key elements in strengthening UNFPA's strategic positioning. Inter-agency groups at country and regional levels also offer opportunities, provided UNFPA country offices engage proactively. Moreover, the reform has allowed for broad positioning of UNFPA's transformative results and UNFPA has developed its role as a strategic partner in cross-cutting areas, such as gender, youth and data.

Relevance of influencing and leveraging shifts

The shifts that aim to influence others to contribute to the ICPD Programme of Action have the most potential to accelerate delivery of results and thus are relevant to UNFPA's acceleration ambitions. Scaling up the provision of high-quality, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services is at the core of UNFPA's mandate, but the strategic plan was the first to promote this shift by ensuring that such services are included in universal health coverage plans. UNFPA is working closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) on this shift, including establishing a portal to facilitate South-South learning on ways to integrate sexual and reproductive health into universal health care.⁷⁹ There are also recent examples of joint publications that confirm the relevance of this shift.⁸⁰ Achieving such a result relies heavily on UNFPA's normative role to influence policy makers at the country level and on shifting focus to financing health care more broadly, as well as sexual and reproductive health specifically.⁸¹ The latter two shifts also have relevance to the broader ICPD agenda. The strategic plan does not bring these shifts together to clarify their potential to accelerate progress and has limited language on influence as part of the normative role. Other comparable UN agencies have made this connection more clearly.⁸² Since 2023, UNFPA has invested substantial resources in brand ambassador training for representatives and emerging leaders which, among other things, is expected to enhance influence and mobilize partners and resources in support of UNFPA's mandate.⁸³ This strengthens the relevance of these shifts, although there is as yet no clear mechanism to link them together in a clear and strategic manner.

Operationalizing strategic shifts related to leveraging and influencing

Finding 7: While the shifts related to leveraging and influencing (normative work and ICPD financing) are not new concepts, they do constitute a change in emphasis and direction. Because of this, new or improved strategies or guidance, as well as individual capacity-building, were required but some were missing or were developed only recently.

As noted elsewhere in the report, there is potential for the shifts relating to UNFPA's normative role and financing the ICPD agenda to accelerate progress. Also noted are the shortfalls in understanding, limited knowledge of the shifts (particularly financing) and large regional variations in actions taken to implement these shifts. The 2024 annual report of the Executive Director⁸⁴ identifies these shifts as two of the six to be prioritized in the remaining years of the strategic plan.

78 UNFPA Evaluation Office. 2022. Formative evaluation of the UNFPA engagement in the reform of the United Nations development system.

79 <https://learn-uhc.srhr.org/>.

80 HRP, UNFPA, WHO Unlocking the Future Advancing Universal Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights within Universal Health Coverage in East and Southern Africa. Policy, Financing, Delivery and Measurement. 2024.

81 UNFPA. 2019. Sexual and reproductive health and rights: and essential element of universal health coverage. Background document for the Nairobi summit on ICPD25 – Accelerating the promise.

82 See for example theory of change, UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 UNICEF/2021/EB/10, paragraphs 7 and 8.

83 UNFPA brand ambassador curriculum and associated documents.

84 UNFPA. N/d. Integrated mid-term review and progress report on the implementation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 DP/FPR/2024/4 (Part I).

The 100-day plan to implement the strategic plan identified products and actions to support its implementation.⁸⁵ The plan did not identify any actions related to UNFPA's normative work but did note various policy and guidance documents relating to the shift from funding to financing, including the resource mobilization strategy⁸⁶ (which touches on the shift to financing), an international financial institution strategy and tools, and guidance on SDG financing for SRHR. While the resource mobilization strategy was completed within the 100-day period, the policy and related guidance was not. The 2024 financing of the ICPD strategy identifies potential tools and approaches that can support this shift and acknowledges the critical link between the normative role and financing the ICPD.

There is limited technical capacity within UNFPA on issues of finance and economics⁸⁷ and the strategy acknowledges that there is an "institutional capacity gap" to be addressed through training, recruitment and consultancy support. An online introductory course and a series of e-learning modules developed by the Asia and Pacific Regional Office was released in 2023; with more advanced online training for representatives and programme staff launched at the end of 2023. The Policy and Strategy Division had originally proposed in May 2023 that this last course be delivered through a two-day programme after the brand ambassador training⁸⁸ but this does not appear to have happened. There have also been some focused regional efforts: in West and Central Africa, as part of UNFPA supplies' shift from funding to financing family planning commodities, training is being rolled out to enhance domestic resource mobilization for family planning commodities. The West and Central Africa Regional Office has also appointed a social policy and health economics advisor to spearhead funding to finance efforts in the region. At the global level, there is also a huge selection of webinars, promotion of knowledge products on the subject and access to a specialist platform. However, this selection is seen as disconnected from the country context and country office capacity to absorb it. It will take substantial effort to ensure that staff have the right capacities to fully utilize this shift to accelerate progress.

The regional programme evaluations found that UNFPA lacks the expertise, tools, incentives and positioning to make a considerable difference in shifting from funding to financing, although noted successes have been achieved in various regions. ESARO, for instance, has supported the use of impact bonds in Kenya, Malawi and Zambia. Investment cases are seen as a promising tool in Asia and Pacific Regional Office (APRO), ASRO, ESARO, EECARO and Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO). The Nigeria country study found successful use of an investment case to increase state government funding of family planning programmes. In countries with decentralized governments, like Bolivia and Nepal, UNFPA has worked with municipalities to ensure increased budget allocations for sexual and reproductive health. The mid-term review also noted that country offices reported this shift as being the one on which they are the least knowledgeable. Key informants noted that, while country offices are expected to meet resource mobilization targets, there are no indicators for tracking or recognizing successful leveraging of external financing. The mid-term review indicates that measurement metrics will be developed to track progress in normative work; assessing UNFPA's contribution to results in this area is not an easy task and may be equally challenging for the shift from funding to financing where any such metrics would need to track funds that do not go through UNFPA.

The importance of UNFPA's normative role is demonstrated in its adjustments to the resource allocation system to establish a funding floor of \$500,000 per year for each country programme – noted as, "the minimum essential support for the normative role for upstream intervention, high-level technical assistance and support for policy implementation, including bringing together knowledge and expertise from within the United Nations development system and facilitating South-South and triangular cooperation".⁸⁹ The strategic plan uses a number of descriptions of the normative role, and notes its various components, but there is still a lack of clarity on what this is – for example, the potential distinction between high-level technical assistance and other types of technical assistance. The business model annex of the strategic plan has the clearest description, noting that, "UNFPA normative work centres around policy advocacy and dialogue, supported by knowledge management, including data analysis, and partnership and South-South and triangular cooperation." However, there is little to no guidance on policy advocacy – the only example found on the myUNFPA website being a module of the

85 <https://sites.google.com/unfpa.org/mysp/sp-2022-2025>.

86 <https://sites.lumapps.com/a/unfpa/myunfpa/ls/content/5361563883929600/unfpa-resource-mobilization-strategy-for-2022-2025>.

87 There is one macro-economist who is "double hatted" as senior adviser economics and demography in the Population and Development Branch as well as in the EECARO.

88 Brand ambassador curriculum document.

89 Strategic Plan 2022-2025, paragraph 87(c). The issue of the resource floor and small country offices is also covered in finding 16.

My Body, My Life, My World Operational Guidance.⁹⁰ While this guidance does encompass a range of UNFPA programme areas, it is focused particularly on adolescents and youth.

The lack of guidance is a challenge, including in building UNFPA's capacity to engage in policy dialogue in contexts where there is pushback against SRHR, or to address policy issues in more complex administrative arrangements, including decentralization, or addressing issues that impact on the ICPD agenda, but which are not within UNFPA's usual competencies, such as migration. Where pushback against UNFPA's mandate limits opportunities for dialogue and policy discussion, for example in Türkiye on sexual and reproductive health, and in Arab States and West and Central Africa on gender and social norms, country offices are often struggling to protect the UNFPA mandate and adapt narratives and strategies in rapidly evolving contexts.

The mid-term review survey reported that only 30 per cent of country offices reported having very strong capacity in advocacy and normative work. These two shifts, which are critical for acceleration, have the least amount of guidance. Operational support for the normative shift has been lacking, and for funding to financing has only recently been developed. Additionally, although there are mentions of both shifts throughout the strategic plan, it does not present a clear strategic approach or coherent, organizational efforts to support their implementation as a strategy to accelerate achievement of the 3TRs.

Operationalizing programming-related strategic shifts

Finding 8: The terminology of megatrends – as a group of global-level effects – is new to UNFPA and has limited operationalization to date but is increasingly receiving considerable attention.

The term “megatrends” was utilized in the 2020 report of the UN Economist Network⁹¹ to describe specific global trends that have shaped the world over time and that pose threats to achievement of the SDGs. The five trends identified in the report are: climate change; demographic shifts particularly population ageing; urbanization; the emergence of digital technologies; and inequalities. The paper notes that these trends are the result of human activity and thus can be shaped by policy choices; some are signs of human progress and, with appropriate national policy choices, have the potential to generate benefits for society. The potential negative impact of others – climate change specifically but also inter-country inequality – can only be addressed through coordinated global efforts.

The strategic shift identified in the strategic plan is, “integrating the effects of megatrends, such as climate change, demographic shifts, inequalities and digitalization, into programming”.⁹² The annex on “Change Stories” amplifies this list with the addition of urbanization and an emphasis on population ageing in the context of demographic shifts.

As noted above, some of these megatrends are not new to UNFPA, particularly demographic shifts and inequalities. Findings in evaluation question 1 note the effective guidance on “leaving no one behind”, which supports country offices in addressing inequalities within countries; this and operational guidance for country teams produced by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) no doubt contribute to high levels of implementation of this shift. Utilizing the organization's demographic skill set, much work has been undertaken on demographic resilience, pioneered by the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region,⁹³ and on lifecycle approaches in the Asia and Pacific region and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Latin America and Caribbean region.⁹⁴

There has been less support for programming of the other megatrends identified in the strategic plan. An approach paper on systematic analysis of megatrends on the 3TRs was to be produced and, although a draft was prepared, it does not appear to have been finalized or published. There have been some headquarters-led initiatives, including a technical working group on climate change and, together with other UN agencies, a call for action to address the effects of climate

90 United Nations Population Fund. 2022. My Body, My Life, My World Operational Guidance. Module 9: Advocacy and Policy Dialogue.

91 Report of the UN Economist Network for the UN 75th Anniversary: Shaping the Trends of Our Time. September 2020.

92 UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, Box 1 - Key strategic shifts of the UNFPA strategic plan, 2022-2025, p. 5.

93 UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office. 2023. Evaluation of UNFPA support to population dynamics and data.

94 Asia and the Pacific and Arab States RPEs.

change,⁹⁵ along with work undertaken particularly in the East and Southern Africa region on the effects of climate change on SRHR.⁹⁶ Efforts to focus on urbanization appear to be underway now⁹⁷ in the context of broader efforts across the United Nations to enhance monitoring of the SDGs in urban contexts.

Broadly, the regional programme evaluations found that this lack of guidance makes it difficult to address concrete needs on the ground, and that there was little support to understand how identified megatrends relate to each other and to UNFPA's mandate. The mid-term review found that integrating the effects of megatrends into programming was one of the two shifts country office staff felt least knowledgeable about.

UNFPA is becoming proactive in considering the effects of global trends on the delivery of its mandate. As part of the development of the strategic plan, UNFPA undertook an exercise⁹⁸ that identified four future scenarios and the strategic options that may exist to accelerate progress towards the 3TRs, the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs. The timeframe for these scenarios is long (2050) but there is overlap between the issues raised and the more immediate megatrends that the strategic plan identifies, especially the effects of digital technologies and the impact of climate change. The other two scenarios relate to: (a) a push-back on the sexual and reproductive rights agenda in some contexts; and (b) the potential effects of biotechnology, both positive and negative, on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The foresight work was to be further developed into a strategic foresight strategy and guidance by a "futures group" to be led by the Policy Strategic Information Branch, which any interested staff could join.⁹⁹ This mechanism produced a provisional draft of a first foresight strategy¹⁰⁰ in January 2024, although at the time of writing this report, the strategy had not been finalized. Moreover, there is a lack of guidance on how country offices can operationalize and integrate the foresight work into their country plan and implementation.

Spurred by the thirtieth anniversary of the ICPD Programme of Action (ICPD30), five briefs were prepared in 2024 on navigating megatrends,¹⁰¹ specifically: demographic change and sustainability; the future of sexual and reproductive health rights; the future of population data; ICPD and climate action; and a safe digital future. The briefs are intended for policymakers and support acceleration of the ICPD commitments; they offer "starting points for discussion on what's next for population, development and sexual and reproductive health and rights including ending gender-based violence and harmful practices." While there is not yet accompanying programme guidance, the briefs do begin to assess trends that affect the achievement of the ICPD commitments and go beyond the initial list of megatrends identified in the strategic plan, encompassing migration, urbanization, social policy, technology facilitated gender-based violence, and the use of AI in population data analysis, among others.

The ICPD30 provided an opportunity for a more considered view of the trends that will affect the ICPD Programme of Action in the coming years. Within UNFPA, responsibility for this strategic thinking has been split between the Technical Division (Population and Development Branch led the preparation of the technical briefs for ICPD30) and the Policy and Strategy Division (the Policy Strategic Information Branch led the preparation of the foresight study). While the implementation of the headquarters optimization initiative¹⁰² and the establishment of a new Programme Division should support a more strategic approach, there is still a split in responsibilities related to analysis and guidance on megatrends between the Population and Development Branch and the Strategic Planning Branch.

95 WHO. 2023. Protecting maternal, newborn and child health from the impacts of climate change: a call to action by WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA.

96 For example, UNFPA. 2021. Frequently asked questions on UNFPA and the climate crisis; UNFPA. 2020. UNFPA and the climate crisis: Strengthening resilience and protecting progress within the Decade of Action.

97 UNFPA vacancy announcement for a programme specialist in the Degree of Urbanization Programme, May 2024.

98 UNFPA. 2022. Four scenarios for three transformative results.

99 <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/four-future-scenarios-three-transformative-results#:~:text=This%20publication%20presents%20four%20plausible,based%20violence%20and%20harmful%20practices.>

100 https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Z1vuweTa2tPTRMqnAzQEAbge_9b7qhRLUgn0RCjamHk/edit.

101 <https://www.unfpa.org/navigatingmegatrends>.

102 The headquarters optimization initiative refers to the organizational changes that are currently being implemented at UNFPA to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization's headquarters.

Finding 9: UNFPA has made concerted efforts to strengthen its humanitarian response capacity. Humanitarian work requires specific capacities, which are distinct from the influencing and advocacy skills that the upstream acceleration agenda requires, with implications for UNFPA internal capacity development efforts and priorities.

In 2018, UNFPA established a dedicated Humanitarian Office to bolster its humanitarian response. There was further reorganization in 2022: the office was renamed the Humanitarian Response Division to better reflect its role, and it was relocated to Geneva to be closer to other humanitarian organizations and geographically closer to regions where much of the humanitarian response is required.

UNFPA has taken a strong coordination lead in its humanitarian work. Within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanism, UNFPA is the lead agency for the Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility within the [Global Protection Cluster](#). A 2019 evaluation¹⁰³ found that sexual and reproductive health working groups in humanitarian contexts can have a positive effect on health programming, and a meta-analysis noted the lack of an IASC SRHR coordination hampered UNFPA's ability to deliver in humanitarian situations.¹⁰⁴ Following advocacy by UNFPA and others, a Sexual and Reproductive Health Task Team has been established within the Global Health Cluster, with UNFPA as the lead agency.¹⁰⁵

Along with the overall increases in expenditure on humanitarian action noted in finding 6 above, the Humanitarian Thematic Fund was established in 2018 to provide flexible multi-year funding to support UNFPA to respond quickly at the onset of a crisis. This has grown from funding of \$5.8 million in 2019¹⁰⁶ to \$34 million in 2022.¹⁰⁷ While there is substantial internal guidance on working in humanitarian contexts, much of this focuses on processes for fund disbursements and accountability, particularly in the UNFPA Policy and Procedures Manual. Programming guidance in sexual and reproductive health in humanitarian contexts is also developed by other agencies, such as WHO. Country study key informants working on humanitarian issues noted the limited guidance available. Guidance is scattered within UNFPA, and there is also now an effort to update and collate relevant guidance to enhance knowledge management around humanitarian response.¹⁰⁸

A new emergency response mechanism has been introduced – the Global Emergency Response Team – consisting of staff who can be deployed immediately while the longer-standing surge mechanism is put in place.¹⁰⁹ The use of surge capacity continues to increase: 2023 saw the highest number of surge staff (190) deployed to 34 countries.¹¹⁰

Regional offices, particularly ASRO, WCARO and ESARO have taken steps to provide additional support to country offices,¹¹¹ for example, by introducing a standard emergency response protocol (ASRO), a regional surge roster (WCARO), and minimum initial service package readiness assessments (ESARO). However, the regional programme evaluations noted resource constraints, including the impact of this on staffing; in the Arab States region, for instance, “double hatting” in both the regional office and country offices impedes UNFPA's coordination efforts, particularly during crises.

Some key informants noted that acute crises can draw attention away from the development and peacebuilding agenda. In the context of protracted crises, efforts to develop resilience are paramount. As noted by key informants at both country and headquarter levels, countries move between humanitarian and development contexts and back again,¹¹² especially as more and more crises are driven by factors such as climate change. In such contexts, linking humanitarian response with preparedness and resilience is important for countries to be able to respond better to future crises. Finding 3 noted that limited guidance and operational support has hindered UNFPA's capacity to programme in the humanitarian-development-peace nexus; additionally, the issues noted above regarding short-term, earmarked funding may hamper UNFPA's ability to work in a more integrated manner, building resilience as part of a humanitarian response and beyond. Regional programme

103 UNFPA Evaluation Office. 2019. Evaluation of the UNFPA capacity in humanitarian action.

104 UNFPA Evaluation Office. 2018. UNFPA Meta-analysis of the engagement of UNFPA in highly vulnerable contexts.

105 UNFPA Humanitarian Action 2024 Overview.

106 UNFPA Report on the structured funding dialogue 2020-2021 DP/FPA/2021/10.

107 UNFPA Report on the structured funding dialogue 2022-2023 DP/FPA/2023/8.

108 Key informant interview.

109 UNFPA Humanitarian Action 2024 Overview.

110 Ibid.

111 RPE findings.

112 Two of the country studies – Chad and South Sudan – are examples of such situations.

evaluations point to limited guidance on nexus work, so, while there is an ever-increasing focus on humanitarian issues, it may be that expenditure would be more effective if it supported a more continuum-based approach.

A recent evaluation¹¹³ found that UNFPA staff accustomed to working in development settings may not have the skills, experience or mindset to work in a humanitarian setting. Staff whose focus was normative work are particularly challenged by the need to switch to working on a more immediate response. As more countries graduate to middle-income country status and call on UNFPA's policy skills, this differentiation may become more pronounced, with significant implications for UNFPA's capacity development efforts in these two skill sets, notwithstanding the need for greater integration between humanitarian and development programming noted above.

Operationalizing strategic shifts related to the external environment (programming within the United Nations family and joint accountability)

Finding 10: UNFPA has fully aligned its CPDs with the UNSDCF and through this process tailored its programming within the UN family. UNFPA continues to engage in joint programmes and uses common indicators at all levels. Many of the shifts and accelerators require a more coherent approach with other UN entities at all levels.

The reformed United Nations development system (UNDS) seeks to increase coordination and coherence among operational activities at the country level through UNSDCFs, underpinned by a thorough common country analysis. The reforms undertaken have enabled improved alignment of United Nations planning documents, including the UNSDCFs, with national needs and priorities. According to surveys undertaken to monitor implementation of the QCPR,¹¹⁴ in 2023, 96 per cent of governments considered that United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs) were effectively responding to national priorities for delivering the SDGs. Moreover, 94 per cent considered activities under the UNSDCFs to be closely aligned with their needs, an increase from 81 per cent in 2019, when the reforms were still in their infancy.

UNFPA was at the centre of the development of the UNSDCF as co-chair of the working group that designed the framework at the global level.¹¹⁵ It moved quickly to prepare for the first round of UNSDCFs, recognizing that it not only had to contribute to the roll-out of the new framework but also to ensure that its transformative results were effectively positioned.

The Policy and Strategy Division coordinated the organization's efforts to orient staff even before the UNSDCF guidance was issued in June 2019, through webinars and a global learning workshop. New country programme document guidance was issued in March 2020 and capacity-building activities were held in 2020 and 2021. Furthermore, UNFPA regional offices adapted the global training to regional realities and conducted region-specific capacity-building activities.

All guidance and resources were made available on a UNSDCF resources toolkit on the UNFPA intranet (MyUNFPA). The toolkit was established as an interactive learning space to access resources, exchange successes and challenges and ask for support throughout the UNSDCF process.

The UNSDCF was fully integrated into 2022 guidance, which requires that all UNFPA country programmes are derived from, and aligned with, nationally agreed and nationally owned cooperation frameworks. It also requires that UN resident coordinators sign off on the derivation and alignment of UNFPA CPDs with the cooperation framework before UNFPA country programmes are submitted for the consideration of the Executive Board.

The 2023 evaluation of UNFPA engagement in the UNDS reform found that UNFPA is generally very active in the preparation of the common country analysis and cooperation frameworks, often leading groups established to develop the documents and supporting data needs for the process. However, the evaluation also found a noticeable level of disconnect – especially

113 UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office. 2024. Evaluation of the organizational resilience of UNFPA in light of its response to COVID-19 pandemic.

114 United Nations. Implementation of General Assembly resolution 75/233 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system. Report of the Secretary-General. A/79/72. 19 April 2024.

115 The UNFPA Deputy Executive Director for Management chaired the UNSDG design team on the new Cooperation Framework Guidance (2018-2019).

between transformative result indicators included in country-specific country programme documents and UNSDCF. The evaluation further found that, while further qualitative research on reasons for this would be useful, interviews and feedback revealed that inconsistencies can also be attributed to delays in the resident coordinator-led UNSDCF formulation process and late changes to cooperation frameworks.

Regarding the strategic shift of increasing the focus on joint accountability, UNFPA has made good use of common or complementary indicators. Within the IRRF of the UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2022-2025, more than 50 per cent of indicators are directly derived from the SDGs and 73 per cent of output indicators are common or integrated with other United Nations entities. This is an example of alignment with the vision of the reform. Table 6 compares the ongoing and previous strategic plans.

TABLE 6: Alignment of UNFPA integrated results resources framework indicators with Sustainable Development Goal indicators or indicators of other United Nations entities¹¹⁶

	SDG indicators (per cent)	Common or complementary indicators (per cent)
Strategic Plan 2018-2021	60%	53%
Strategic Plan 2022-2025	50%	73%

Source: UNFPA Evaluation Office. 2022. *Formative evaluation of the UNFPA engagement in the reform of the United Nations development system.*

UNFPA remained among the United Nations entities participating in the largest number of UN joint programmes in 2023. The total programme and institutional budget expenses allocated to development outputs in 2023 was \$1.281 billion, out of which \$65.9 million was allocated to joint programmes, which represents 5 per cent of the total. UNFPA also received a total of \$233 million from the UN-to-UN transfers, which represents the largest source of non-core funding to UNFPA.¹¹⁷

The UNFPA Resource Mobilization Strategy 2022-2025 emphasizes UNFPA's commitment to strengthening coordination across UN agencies, including via various pooled funding mechanisms, such as multi-donor trust funds, joint programmes, and UN-to-UN transfers. Funding from UN joint and pooled funds remains among the largest sources of UNFPA non-core funding. In addition, UNFPA continues to provide country offices with specific guidance, webinars and training to engage and take the opportunity offered by global pooled funding mechanisms.¹¹⁸

Notwithstanding UNFPA's commitment to engaging with the UNDS reform, many of the accelerators and strategic shifts are also being pursued by other UN agencies and would benefit from a joint approach within a UNCT. For example, in the area of gender social norms, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has significant experience, as does United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the empowerment of Women (UN Women), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has just developed a Gender Social Norms index to help quantify biases against women. Advocacy for certain types of policy reform may be more effective when undertaken by the UNCT as a whole, possibly through the resident coordinator. Critical areas for implementation of the strategic shifts, such as knowledge management, strategic communications and resource mobilization could also benefit from a joined-up approach at the county level.

¹¹⁶ Common indicators are the same in the results and resources frameworks of at least two entities. Complementary indicators are not repeated verbatim in the results and resources frameworks of another United Nations entity. However, they are related or provide different but complementary insights into the same issue, high level result or area of complementary work.

¹¹⁷ UNFPA. Information Note. Implementation of General Assembly resolution 72/279 on repositioning of the United Nations development system in the context of General Assembly resolution 75/233 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system and General Assembly resolution 76/4 on the review of the functioning of the reinvigorated resident coordinator system, including its funding arrangement. Executive Board annual session 2024.

¹¹⁸ UNSDG/UNFPA. Checklist for UNSDG Entities' Governing Bodies. Annual Session of the Executive Board, June 2024.

Implementing the strategic shifts

Finding 11: An analysis of CPDs indicates that country offices have increased emphasis on all strategic shifts. This, together with further efforts to operationalize them, sets the enabling environment for the future implementation of strategic shifts.

An analysis of 75 CPDs was undertaken utilizing artificial intelligence (see Annex 7 for more details of the methodology). The analysis assessed whether current CPDs make reference to strategic shifts and whether there was a change in emphasis compared with the previous CPD in that country. There are limitations to the analysis, but it does suggest that most country programme documents make reference to all of the strategic shifts and, when referenced, have increased the emphasis on the strategic shifts¹¹⁹ (see Figure 7 below). This is similar to the findings from the mid-term review.

The least referenced shifts were scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services as part of universal health coverage, and elements of megatrends, specifically digitalization, climate change and, by a substantial degree, urbanization. The analysis shows that at regional levels these were also the shifts (or elements of shifts) that showed the most variation in CPD references.

Mid-term review survey results reported that 99 per cent of office staff felt they were knowledgeable on scaling up sexual and reproductive health in the context of universal health coverage. Despite this, regional programme evaluations noted that there was generally a lack of evidence on implementation of this shift or there were questions as to how this shift differs from traditional advocacy and technical assistance, which UNFPA provides to enhance capacities to deliver sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence services. In addition, key informants indicated that this is an output to be delivered rather than a shift, suggesting that the shift is interpreted differently in different regional contexts.

Guidance on digital solutions has been limited or non-existent and country offices may not be equipped to address it. The mid-term review survey¹²⁰ shows that less than 65 per cent of offices felt that staff were “fairly or very knowledgeable” about integrating megatrends into programming, lower than most of the other strategic shifts.

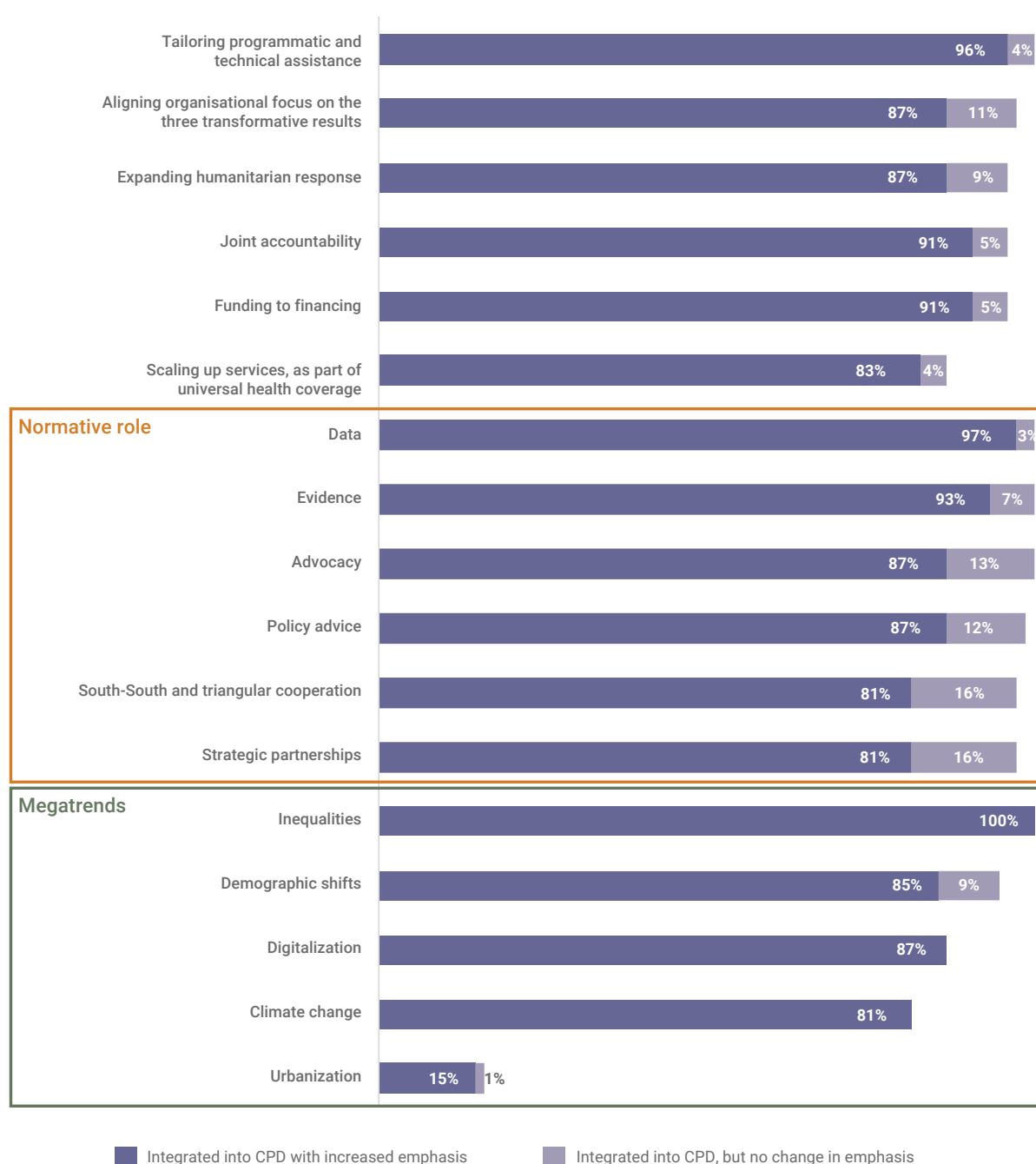
While only 77 per cent of respondents in the mid-term review survey felt the country office staff were fairly or very knowledgeable about the shift to expand humanitarian capacity, almost all CPDs do reference this shift. The relatively low level of knowledge may reflect the issues noted above regarding the different skill sets required for humanitarian response. The regional programme evaluations found that there has been an expansion in humanitarian response capacity, but this is largely reactive and based on resource availability. One country office noted that they had the technical capacity to expand humanitarian response if needed but would only be able to do so if funds were available. Recent efforts to improve guidance on humanitarian response, and to better position UNFPA to lead humanitarian response on sexual and reproductive health, as well as gender-based violence, will support implementation of this shift if resources allow.

The CPD analysis suggests that country offices are increasing their efforts on identified shifts related to funding to financing and UNFPA’s normative role, both of which have high potential for accelerating progress. Although there are positive examples relating to both shifts,¹²¹ the regional programme evaluations found a number of factors that hamper implementation, including: inconsistent understanding of UNFPA’s normative role and of the distinction between funding and financing; a narrow focus of normative work on legal frameworks and insufficient attention to implementation of laws; limited expertise and tools within UNFPA; and the need to support normative work with funds and programmatic efforts in a context of shrinking resources.

119 AILYZE final report and data on CPD analysis.

120 Mid-term review detailed survey results shared with the evaluation team.

121 For normative work, particularly in middle-income countries, and in the application of investment cases as a tool to support the shift from funding to financing. In ESARO, UNFPA has supported the use of impact bonds.

FIGURE 7: Reference to and emphasis on strategic shifts in 75 country programme documents¹²²


Source: AI-facilitated analysis of CPDs.

The mid-term review survey noted that advocacy for the 3TRs is a key normative intervention in most country offices. Globally, less than two thirds of country offices reported actions on catalysing financing; however, only 27 per cent of offices in Arab States reported on this compared to 81 per cent in East and Southern Africa and 86 per cent in West and Central Africa. Dialogue with international financial institutions to finance the 3TRs and ICPD Programme of Action was undertaken in just over half of UNFPA's offices. As with other shifts, these two require greater clarity, as well as more coherent organizational efforts to support their implementation as a strategy to accelerate achievement of the 3TRs.

¹²² The shifts "strengthening the UNFPA normative role in all countries where UNFPA is present" and "integrating the effects of megatrends, such as climate change, demographic shifts, inequalities and digitalization, into programming" were broken down into subvariables to facilitate the AI-generated analysis.

4.3. THE ROLE OF ENABLERS IN SUPPORTING OPERATIONALIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SHIFTS AND ACCELERATORS

Evaluation question 3: What are the enablers of strategic plan implementation and to what extent have they facilitated the acceleration and strategic shifts foreseen in the strategic plan?

Overall response

The evidence suggests that knowledge management, strategic communication, the business model and human resources are key enablers of strategic plan implementation, but their effectiveness in facilitating acceleration and strategic shifts varies. Knowledge management and strategic communication have not yet been optimally leveraged to support the strategic shifts. The business model's modes of engagement are not fully aligned with the shifts, and human resource constraints, particularly in small country offices, hinder their implementation. While some steps have been taken to address these challenges, such as developing a new knowledge management strategy and providing targeted support to small offices, further efforts are needed.

The "strategic shifts" and "accelerators" examined in the previous two sections of this findings chapter are specific components of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. The term "enabler" is not used in the strategic plan¹²³ but was applied as a tool in the evaluation to capture issues that can explain performance in operationalizing and implementing the shifts and accelerators. Specific enablers were identified during the process of preparing the evaluation terms of reference (strategic communication and human resources management) and then a further two enablers were added during the inception phase (knowledge management and the business model). They cover thematic areas that are part of the strategic plan and would enable or possibly hinder the operationalization of the strategic shifts and accelerators.

Finding 12: Knowledge is a critical thread that connects many of the actions that will accelerate progress towards the 3TRs – especially, but not only, the normative role – but effective knowledge management is a challenge for the organization.

The strategic move towards acceleration through influencing others requires the critical input of knowledge in its broadest sense. Knowledge management plays a vital role in such work through helping decision makers organize, share and disseminate relevant knowledge related to specific policy issues. The following definition of knowledge management is set out in the 'Mode of Engagement':

A dynamic process of generation and acquisition, dissemination and sharing, utilization and adaptation of knowledge products and evidence, including localized innovative solutions, for accelerating the achievements of the three transformative results, advancing the ICPD Programme of Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It covers systematic coordination of people, technology, processes and organizational structures to ensure the programme countries have the knowledge they need when they need it – and in the format that they need it – to tackle the most difficult development challenges.¹²⁴

The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 does not include an explicit strategy for knowledge management or, more broadly, any agenda for knowledge. It does set out evidence and data as one of the six accelerators; however, knowledge goes beyond data and evidence and all forms of knowledge need to be effectively and efficiently managed to ensure utilization.

The mid-term review identified challenges for knowledge management in UNFPA and included optimizing and systematizing knowledge management among the six remedial priorities to improve its readiness and the execution of its strategic

¹²³ It was mentioned once (para 110): UNFPA will continue to support and improve system-wide coherence and collaboration and capitalize on the United Nations reform as an enabler and opportunity to deliver on the strategic plan. Issues related to UN reform were already captured in the strategic shifts.

¹²⁴ Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 3 Business Model paragraph 8 (c).

plan.¹²⁵ Specifically, the review noted that knowledge management in UNFPA needs to better support the application of the key shifts and that the use of analytics, and documenting and sharing evidence internally and externally, must be improved. This would be facilitated by an upgraded knowledge management platform to keep abreast of rapidly changing information technology.¹²⁶

Evidence from regional programme evaluations also points to the need to strengthen knowledge management, noting that it is often weak and does not support effective operationalization of accelerators and shifts.¹²⁷ For example, although EECARO aims to enhance results through knowledge management in its 2022-2025 programme and despite producing valuable knowledge products, focal point meetings are infrequent, and knowledge is poorly documented across platforms.

Some knowledge management initiatives at the global and regional levels are strong. For example, the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project¹²⁸ in West and Central Africa is developing a robust knowledge management platform to foster collaboration and communication among countries involved. The project also hosts a community of practice, and shares guides and briefs on best practices with decision makers and policy makers. The resource mobilization team has also set up shared folders, peer-to-peer communities of practice and hosts organizational resource mobilization retreats. At the regional level, such initiatives are often dependent on the advisor. For example, the Programme Division technical network fostered by LACRO has been highlighted as a good example of a functioning mechanism that supports country offices including in knowledge management, mainly because of the regional advisors who have fostered it. However, such initiatives are often driven by different projects, units or individuals and not brought together in a way that would benefit a wider set of users or be more coherent to enhance efficiency.

In response to these challenges, a new knowledge management strategy has been developed,¹²⁹ which was only approved in March 2024, replacing the previous 2018-2021 strategy. The vision statement is broadly aligned with the vision of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the strategy aims to contribute to four strategic results (see Box 2).

Box 2: UNFPA knowledge management vision and strategic results

UNFPA knowledge management vision: By 2030, UNFPA is a leading agency in knowledge and solutions for promoting the ICPD agenda and achieving the goal of universal access to sexual and reproductive health and the realization of reproductive rights, including, in particular, ending unmet need for family planning, ending preventable maternal deaths, and ending gender-based violence and harmful practices.

Strategic results of the UNFPA knowledge management strategy:

- i. To enhance knowledge availability and accessibility;
- ii. To boost knowledge generation and dissemination;
- iii. To strengthen internal institutional arrangements; and
- iv. To leverage technological advancements, such as artificial intelligence, to transform the world for women and girls.

Source: UNFPA Knowledge Management Strategy 2024-2030.

In response to the recommendation in the mid-term review, UNFPA will establish a dedicated knowledge management team within the Quality Programming Branch of the new Programme Division.¹³⁰ The knowledge management strategy will also establish the architecture aimed at promoting more effective coordination in this area. A Knowledge Management Committee, chaired by the director of the Programme Division, will be established in addition to the existing inter-divisional

¹²⁵ Mid-term review paragraphs 12 and 13.

¹²⁶ Ibid paragraphs 101.

¹²⁷ EECA, Asia and Pacific, Arab States and LAC country studies.

¹²⁸ <https://wcaro.unfpa.org/en/swedd>.

¹²⁹ UNFPA. 2024. UNFPA Knowledge Management Strategy 2024-2030: Leveraging the power of knowledge to transform the world for women and girls.

¹³⁰ Mid-term review report paragraph 15 (a)ii.

working group on knowledge management. All business units will also designate at least one member of staff as the knowledge management focal point. Most importantly, the strategy notes that all UNFPA personnel will be responsible for implementing the strategy through “actively generating, sharing and utilizing knowledge to inform and improve the fund’s work”.¹³¹

Although the strategy includes mechanisms to coordinate between different units involved in knowledge management – effectively, this is all headquarter units, regional offices and country offices – it does not bring together the different units with more specific roles in knowledge management, such as innovation, SSTC and communication, in either a strategic or a conceptual way. The strategy is structured more as a programme to implement activities to achieve important knowledge management results and critical parts of a broader knowledge agenda. It mentions the importance of knowledge management for acceleration but does not show how knowledge management will help operationalize and implement the strategic shifts and accelerators or contribute to the acceleration agenda at the core of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

While the knowledge management strategy notes that it complements other strategies,¹³² there is no overall knowledge approach to bring all these elements together – for example, innovation (new knowledge) and SSTC (external knowledge) or evaluation and communications. While different producers, sharers and users of knowledge will be part of the knowledge management architecture described above, the knowledge management strategy does not include an agenda to explain how these different elements should work together and interact.

Finding 13: Strategic communication can be critical, including for strengthening advocacy efforts as a core part of the acceleration agenda, but this area has yet to reach its potential.

Communication that is purposive and targeted towards specific groups is essential for normative work and further efforts aimed at persuading others to change. Strategic communication can play a crucial role in policy advocacy by enhancing the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. Strategic communication identifies key stakeholders, including policymakers, influencers and the public. By tailoring messages to these audiences, advocates can engage and mobilize support for their cause. Advocacy rarely succeeds in isolation and strategic communication facilitates coalition building by connecting like-minded organizations, activists and experts.

Although the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 recognizes communication as, “critical to accelerating the achievement of the three transformative results”,¹³³ there is no clear definition and guidance on the meaning and implementation of “strategic” communication. The current communication strategy from 2019 is now outdated; however, since ICPD25 in Nairobi, there has been an operational framework that has been promoted through regional workshops.¹³⁴ Nonetheless, the area is under-utilized as an enabler of better advocacy or as an accelerator in its own right (as articulated in the Latin American and the Caribbean regional programme).

Results from the Asia and Pacific regional programme evaluation survey show that country offices perceive their capacity in strategic communication to be strongest in terms of managing reputation and risk, and positioning, building trust, inspiring and motivating. However, they rate themselves lower in terms of using communication for shifting social norms and changing behaviour, moving from “neutrals” to “allies” and finding new supporters, and driving funding and partnerships. The Asia and Pacific regional programme evaluation suggests that a more traditional approach to communication, focused on branding, reputation and positioning prevails, while newer functions linked to strategic communication are yet to be fully understood, owned and operationalized.

The need for communications to evolve beyond traditional roles is also understood in other regions and there has been a growing awareness of the importance of strengthening strategic communications. At the country level, there is a mixed picture with some communication officers working with theories of change that are clearly linked with advocacy and partnerships, while in others there are insufficient capacities, both in terms of skills and resources.

131 Knowledge Management Strategy page 12.

132 Ibid. page 4.

133 Strategic Plan 2022-2025, paragraph 114.

134 “Drive positive awareness of UNFPA’s mandate, protect mandate & reputation and evolve & innovate the communications function.”

Most regional programme evaluations suggest that strategic resource allocation and investment in communication activities are needed to maximize impact and effectiveness. The lack of professional communications staff at regional and country levels has been a hampering issue for most regions.

In some regions, there is an issue with the overarching goals of the strategic plan not being aligned with government priorities within the region and, therefore, the simple conclusion that effective communication of the current strategic plan would be more hindering than helpful for UNFPA in the region. For example, in the EECA region, some believe that communicating UNFPA's added value in the area of population data is more important than communication of the strategic plan.

The diversity of a region presents a communications challenge including the absence of a common language. One of the challenges identified within the Latin America and Caribbean region concerns handling cultural and linguistic diversity, particularly related to coordination between the regional office and the Caribbean subregional office but also in relation to the availability of necessary tools and resources and the multiple languages – primarily Spanish, but also English, French and Portuguese – that are used in the region.

Finding 14: While UNFPA's strategic direction has changed to focus on acceleration, the modes of engagement have not been adjusted and are not fully aligned with the strategic shifts set out in the strategic plan.

The modes of engagement have been a core part of the business model contained in the strategic plans since 2014: (a) advocacy and policy dialogue; (b) capacity development; (c) knowledge management; (d) coordination, partnership and South-South and triangular cooperation; and (e) service delivery. They have been described as representing UNFPA's "offer" to programme countries¹³⁵ or "how" UNFPA will implement the strategic plan.¹³⁶ They have changed little over the two previous strategic plans, although with the addition of coordination, partnership and SSTC in the Strategic Plan 2018-2021. The modes of engagement selected are important as they directly relate to the required skill sets needed to deliver the country programme, including responding to humanitarian crises.

What has changed is the linkage between modes of engagement and different categories of programme country.¹³⁷ The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 removes any such formal linkages but does include a constraint in the use of direct services. Specifically, service delivery can be used in tier II and tier III countries to pilot or showcase different or alternative ways of providing high-quality services. However, according to the business model, this type of service delivery will only be used sparsely, and on a small scale; it will be approved only on an exceptional basis.¹³⁸

Interventions based on piloting, demonstration or proof of concept have the potential to bring together a number of the accelerators or strategic shifts. Since they are trying something new, they support the innovation accelerator as well as the evidence accelerator through the process of learning. By learning and providing evidence, they feed into the normative and ICPD financing strategic shifts. While lessons should be learned from all modes of engagement, learning is an intrinsic element of piloting and should not only apply to piloting of services. It should also be recognized that piloting or developing a "proof of concept" is a completely different offer that is inherently risky and based on learning whether successful or not. In addition, because of the strong learning element, it is usually more expensive than implementing the same activities in the traditional manner.

The example of the Botswana health drones (Box 3) brings together innovation, partnerships, evidence and LNOB accelerators. It also brings in the strategic shifts of scaling up the provision of high-quality comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and funding to financing. It is also an example of the time it can take to develop a good proof of concept and the associated risks that piloting entails.

135 Guidance note for aligning country programmes to the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 Version: 11 November 2021.

136 Strategic Plan 2022-2025 Annex 3 Business Model paragraph 2.

137 In the Strategic Plan 2022-2025, UNFPA classifies the 119 programme countries into three tiers to prioritize the countries furthest from achieving the three transformative results. In the previous two strategic plans, countries were classified in one of four quadrants.

138 UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2022-2025, Annex 3, Business model, para 8 (e).

Box 3: A proof of concept approach – Botswana health drones

The Ministry of Health of Botswana, in collaboration with partners including UNFPA, initiated a three-phase proof of concept project to improve healthcare delivery using remotely piloted aircrafts (drones) to transport medical products, including blood products, drugs and commodities. The project aims to revolutionize the supply chain, improve accessibility and availability of lifesaving commodities for hard-to-reach communities, save costs, and reduce lead delivery times and inefficiencies. Phase I, completed in 2021, involved co-creation, prototyping, community engagement and experimentation. Phase II will start in 2024 and will explore the delivery of live products within the Okavango and Ngami Health District.

UNFPA has committed to supporting the ministry in strengthening the generation and use of strategic information, including monitoring and evaluation of the project's implementation. The UNFPA country office has received funding through the Strategic Investment Facility to expand its support for the drones for health project, which has the potential to influence two of UNFPA's transformative results. Investing in a resource mobilization and partnership strategy is expected to increase financial resources towards reducing the maternity mortality rate and unmet need for family planning via the project. Additionally, investments in monitoring and evaluation will improve data availability and accessibility for designing high-impact programmes in the district, a priority area for UNFPA.

The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 recognizes the interdependence of the modes of engagement. For example, UNFPA's normative work centres around policy advocacy and dialogue, supported by knowledge management, including data and analysis, and partnership and SSTC. Some areas are implicitly mainstreamed across the modes of engagement, such as work in humanitarian contexts. In some regions, humanitarian service delivery is being increasingly used in countries regardless of their tiers. In other area of work, such as engaging in piloting or proof of concept interventions, a separate mode of engagement is lacking. The new knowledge management strategy notes that knowledge management should be undertaken by all staff and, because it aims for UNFPA staff to be equipped with necessary knowledge, it does not include knowledge management as a mode of engagement. As argued in finding 12, knowledge management is critical for policy dialogue, but the role is more of a knowledge broker, bringing internal and external knowledge, including local knowledge, to decision makers. It links with the SSTC (external knowledge) and partnerships (especially knowledge-based partnerships). The knowledge management mode of engagement as currently defined could be focused on its core role at the country level.

Finding 15: Small country offices face specific challenges in implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts, including constraints to structures, human resources and budgets. Additional regional support mechanisms and innovative partnerships are among the solutions being used to address these challenges.

There is no official UNFPA definition of "small country office" but a funding level of less than \$5 million (total operations volume) and fewer than 20 staff positions has been used by UNFPA.¹³⁹ By this definition, there are 47 small country offices or 39 per cent of the total number of countries and territories with UNFPA programmes. By region, the proportion of small offices varies from 17 per cent in West and Central Africa to 76 per cent in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Small offices represent only 15 per cent of tier I countries but 57 per cent and 63 per cent of tier II and tier III countries respectively. Table 7 illustrates these points.

¹³⁹ The evaluation team used countries receiving the minimum \$500,000 per annum when selecting country studies. Five of the 12 country studies for this evaluation were small country offices (3 virtual, 2 visits).

TABLE 7: UNFPA small country offices by region and tier¹⁴⁰

	Tier I	Tier II	Tier III	Total	Number of country offices	Total as percentage of all country offices
Asia and the Pacific	1	3	4	8	22	36%
Arab States	1	3	1	5	15	33%
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	0	4	9	13	17	76%
East and Southern Africa	2	5	0	7	22	32%
Latin America and the Caribbean	1	4	5	10	20	50%
West and Central Africa	3	1	0	4	23	17%
Total	8	20	19	47	119	39%
No of country offices	54	35	30	119		
Total as percentage of all country offices	15%	57%	63%	39%		

Source: UNFPA Dashboard 2.0.

Of the 47 small country offices, 42 are in middle-income countries (15 in lower middle-income countries and 27 in upper middle-income countries). These middle-income country offices, especially those in upper middle-income countries, may face additional challenges in mobilizing non-core resources since donors are not present. Regional and subregional resource mobilization opportunities, as well as strengthened capacities to mobilize domestic resources, may be more important.

TABLE 8: UNFPA small country office annual funding and position count by region

	Annual funding (US\$ million)	Average position count
Asia and the Pacific	2.33	10.8
Arab States	2.14	12.9
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	2.10	13.4
East and Southern Africa	1.76	10.7
Latin America and the Caribbean	2.37	10.1
West and Central Africa	1.43	7.0

Source: UNFPA Dashboard 2.0.

140 The table does not include the 36 countries covered by the multi-country programmes covering the Caribbean and the Pacific subregions, which cover countries in various tiers.

The business model implies that UNFPA believes that it is important to maintain a universal presence. The introduction of budget floors makes it possible for small offices to exist and perform normative upstream work. Staffing structures are often scaled-down versions of larger offices with staff double-hatting responsibilities and taking on multiple focal point responsibilities. Smaller offices often need greater support from regional offices but regional programme evaluations report that regional offices often appear overstretched, with staff playing multiple roles.

In East and Southern Africa, a middle-income country hub was established to serve the small country offices in middle-income countries in the region (Botswana, Eswatini, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles and South Africa). The middle-income country hub provides unique technical expertise and programme advisory services to these country offices in areas such as policy research and development, sustainable financing and strengthening national development planning frameworks, playing a crucial role in advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality, and population and development in the region. Likewise, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the regional office fosters a cluster approach that has proven affective, enabling offices to support each other by leveraging their thematic expertise, working as a community of practice.¹⁴¹

Partnerships can also play a major role in offsetting human resource constraints. Thailand is a positive example of UNFPA establishing strong academic and innovation partnerships in a middle-income country and small country office context. Specifically, the Asia and Pacific regional programme evaluation notes that the UNFPA Thailand country office has active engagement with the government in terms of providing the research needed to guide policies in an ageing society. Similarly, in EECARO, a partnership with the International Centre for Reproductive Health at the University of Ghent, which supports the Academic Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy, has provided training and sexual and reproductive health policy analysis both in the regional office and in many of the region's country offices.

These examples illustrate the importance of having innovative and flexible agreements and partnerships with companies, think tanks, academia, hubs and of being able to timely deploy consultants and experts. This approach of “buying” expertise may be more cost-effective than having a broad range of technically skilled individuals in regional offices and headquarters.

4. 4 THE RELEVANCE OF MOVING TO UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Evaluation question 4: To what extent is the conceptualization of the next strategic plan as “unfinished business” still relevant, given the state of progress towards the SDGs and 3TRs?

Overall response

The conceptualization of the next strategic plan as unfinished business is no longer sufficient, given the lack of progress – and in some cases, reversal – towards the SDGs, 3TRs, and the ICPD Programme of Action. Despite some long-term improvements, recent data reveal that progress has been uneven, and many targets are progressing too slowly or even regressing.

The optimism and ambition of the 2030 Agenda is clear throughout the United Nations General Assembly resolution that launched it in September 2015. The “comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centred” set of 17 universal and transformative Goals and 169 targets were to be achieved by 2030 and Member States committed to “working tirelessly” for the full implementation of the Agenda.¹⁴² In July 2017, when UNFPA was completing the design of the Strategic Plan 2018-2021 as the first of a series of three, the ambition remained but it was already recognized that the pace of progress was insufficient to fully meet the SDGs and targets by 2030.¹⁴³

UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 noted that, while it would continue to advance the ICPD Programme of Action, it would concentrate on recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and restoring the gains lost while accelerating progress towards

141 Evaluation of the Regional Programme in Latin America and the Caribbean. Forthcoming in late 2024.

142 United Nations. 2015. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/Res/70/1.

143 United Nations. Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017.

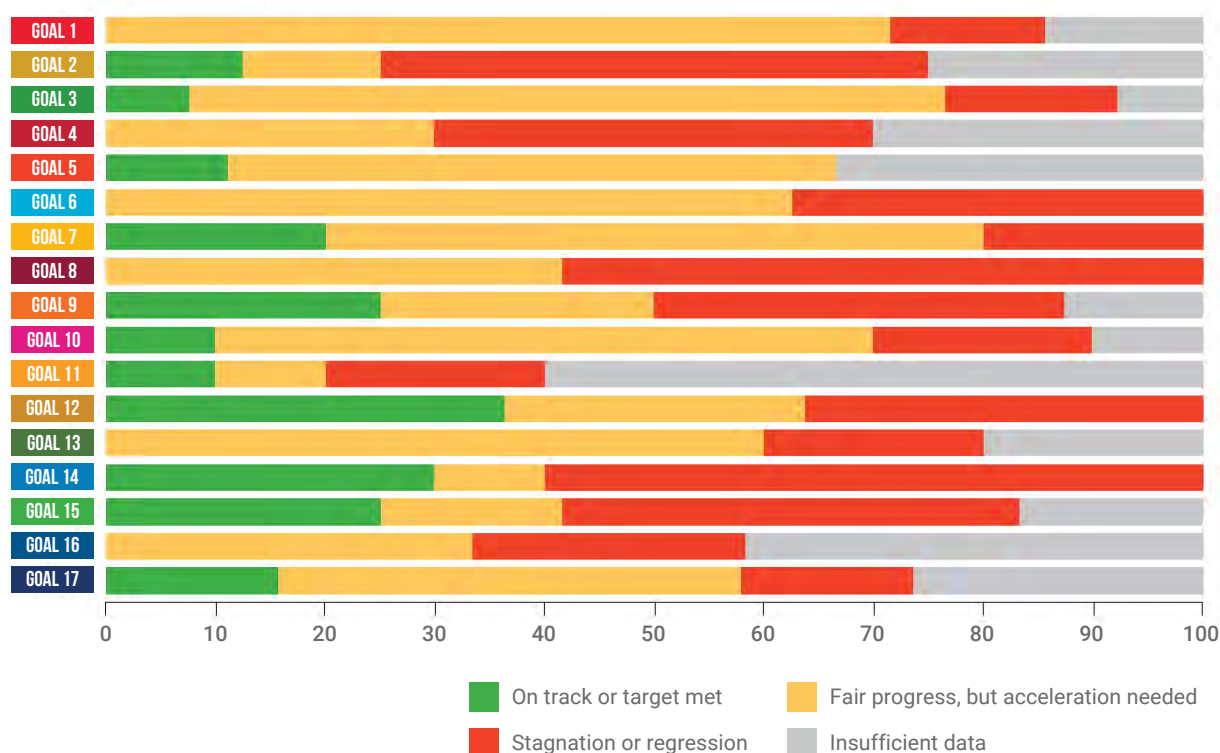
achieving the 3TRs and the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁴⁴ It states that the 3TRs help UNFPA move towards realizing the strategic plan goal of “universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and the acceleration of the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action”.¹⁴⁵ Acceleration is therefore the key theme of Strategic Plan 2022-2025 referring both to the 3TRs and SDGs, as well as to the ICPD Programme of Action.¹⁴⁶

Finding 16: The SDGs targets are not on track, progress in implementing the ICPD Programme of Action is uneven and considerable acceleration is still needed to achieve the 3TRs.

At the midpoint of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, it is clear that most of the SDGs are not likely to be met by 2030. Although there has been some progress, a significant proportion of targets are progressing too slowly or regressing. The 2023 United Nations SDG report¹⁴⁷ notes two factors that highlight this situation: (a) of the approximately 140 targets that can be assessed, half of them show moderate or severe deviations from the desired trajectory; and (b) more than 30 per cent of these targets have experienced no progress or, even worse, regression below the 2015 baseline.

Strategic Plan 2022-2025 notes that it contributes to all 17 SDGs but identifies the following priority SDGs for UNFPA: (a) SDG 3: Good health and well-being; (b) SDG 5: Gender equality; (c) SDG 10: Inequality; (d) SDG 13: Climate action; (e) SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions, and; (f) SDG 17: Partnership for the goals, as well as SDG 1 on ending poverty in all its forms. Figure 8 below indicates the status of the individual SDGs.

FIGURE 8: Progress assessment for the 17 Sustainable Development Goals based on assessed targets



Source: *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023*.

144 UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, paragraphs 7.

145 Strategic Plan 2022-2025 Figure 2.

146 The phrase “accelerating the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action and achieving the three transformative results” (or similar) is used throughout the document.

147 United Nations. 2023. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023. Special Edition – Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet*. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>.

The ICPD Programme of Action, adopted three decades ago, has seen some successes. Key indicators of progress include a 34 per cent reduction in maternal mortality, a doubling of women using contraception and a 50 per cent decrease in child mortality. Countries worldwide have integrated population issues into their development plans and governments' commitment to data collection has enabled informed decision-making about the most beneficial programmes and policies for their citizens.

However, it is crucial to recognize that progress has been uneven across regions, within regions and within countries in each region. Many individuals, particularly those from the most vulnerable communities, have not shared equally in the benefits of social and economic development. The yearly reduction in maternal deaths has stagnated and, since 2016, there has been no global progress in preventing women from dying due to preventable causes during pregnancy and childbirth. For the first time in decades, hard-fought development gains are being eroded, putting at risk the safety and health of UNFPA's target populations.

Research by UNFPA¹⁴⁸ revealed the lack of progress towards the 3TRs and the acceleration needed to achieve them. The research also identified significant regional differences. While at present rates of change it will take 128 years to end preventable maternal deaths in the Asia and the Pacific region, in West and Central Africa this goal is not expected to be met by the year 2500. Equally, at current rates of progress early child marriage would be ended in 96 years in Asia and the Pacific versus 443 years in West and Central Africa. Finally, the research examined the impact of population growth on the 3TRs, specifically in contexts where population growth outpaces progress towards each target. In such contexts countries would need to accelerate to show any progress towards the 3TRs.

The data used above come from a variety of sources but cover the period from 1994 to 2020.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, they do not capture the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic or the global economic crisis that followed it. It is possible that the situation could be significantly worse. Moreover, the report does not cover gender-based violence due to a lack of trend data at the time of analysis. While analysis of trends may not be possible, other sources indicate severe issues in this area as well. The 2024 annual report of the Executive Director¹⁵⁰ notes that globally, 26 per cent of ever-partnered women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a husband or intimate partner at least once in their lifetime.¹⁵¹

Finding 17: While a plan for three consecutive strategic plans was a very good one, the changes that have taken place in recent years means that it is no longer a case of "unfinished business" for the next strategic plan as originally foreseen.

The series of three strategic plans provided an opportunity for consistency and for longer term thinking. Many structural elements of the ongoing and previous two strategic plans have largely stayed the same. The bullseye concept has been developed over time, specifically to bring the SDGs into Strategic Plan 2018-2021. The modes of engagement were enhanced with the addition of partnerships in the 2018 strategic plan and remained the same in Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

There have also been some major changes in Strategic Plan 2022-2025, none more important than the focus on 3TRs at the outcome level. But not all strategic shifts are new to UNFPA staff even if they may be new to the strategic plan. For example, the shift of tailoring country programmes to national contexts within the ongoing reform of the UN development system was not included in the previous strategic plan¹⁵² but comes as a result of the reforms that were introduced in 2017 to 2018.

A degree of consistency is especially important given the efforts that are needed to align the work of UNFPA to a new strategic plan in terms of providing new directions, capacities and changes in mindset. Findings in sections 4.1 and 4.2 indicate the time it can take to fully operationalize the full alignment to the new strategic plan. New strategic direction,

148 UNFPA. October 2023. Level of acceleration needed to achieve three transformative results. Draft futures paper prepared by Policy and Strategy Division and Technical Division.

149 UNFPA. 2023. Accelerating UNFPA three transformative results: Methodological note. September 12, 2023.

150 UNFPA Integrated mid-term review and progress report on the implementation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 DP/FPR/2024/4 (Part I).

151 This data does not cover all countries where UNFPA operates but is limited to a smaller portion of countries that have data on violence against women.

152 The Strategic Plan 2018-2021 did refer to 'tailoring to country contexts' with regard to modes of engagement (para. 51) but not in relation to the broader country programme.

guidance and capacity-building are required to guide the implementation of the strategic shifts. Efforts to align CPDs to the new strategic plan were inevitably limited and alignment could only occur with the development of a new CPD with the associated alignment of human resources. This will take some time and have implications for the ability to fully implement the acceleration agenda. Furthermore, new CPDs that start in 2025 will do so at the same time that a new strategic plan is being designed. Moreover, 23 country programmes started in 2020 or 2021 and end in 2025, and therefore would not start a new CPD during the life of the strategic plan.

Notwithstanding the dual challenges of effort and time to design, operationalize and implement a strategic plan, the series of three plans needs to remain flexible and responsive to a changing global context. This is especially true when some of the drivers for change have been, and remain, external, such as the QCPR, which drives the priorities and strategy of the overall UN development system within each entity's mandate, and the UNDS reform process, which led to significant changes in the way the UNDS works at the country and regional levels. Outside the United Nations, the strategic plans must be flexible to adjust to megatrends described in finding 8, as well as socioeconomic and political events that will affect the aspirations and strategic direction of the organization. The new foresight planning also described in finding 8 will be important in this respect.

Finding 18: The strategic shifts and other strategic elements that will support acceleration are spread throughout the strategic plan document and there is no clear effort to link them in a clear and coherent way.

While acceleration is at the core of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 document, the focus is on the six accelerators that relate to the strategic plan outputs. As has already been described in Section 4.1, this approach is relevant and has been largely operationalized. It is, however, limited in scope and does not capture all the elements of what is needed to really accelerate progress towards the 3TRs, ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs. Some of the important elements are critical strategic shifts and were discussed in Section 4.2. In addition, some of the enablers described in Section 4.3 would also be critical elements of an acceleration strategy, such as knowledge management and strategic communication.

Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action requires an enabling environment of the right policies, strategies and decisions at all levels. Advocacy, strategic communication and knowledge brokering are all required to support this process of getting agreement on the need for a policy change. Capacity-building may then be necessary to support policy development and implementation, which then requires financing and partnerships. Many of these key elements of an acceleration strategy – such as advocacy and partnerships – are spread throughout the outputs, modes of engagement and accelerators, as well as in other parts of the strategic plan document. Others, such as strategic communication and knowledge management, are hardly included at all.

As already noted, the 12 strategic shifts included some, but not all, accelerators. At the same time, the engagement with the outputs, accelerators and modes of engagement are complicated by the fact that some issues cut across two of them (for example, partnerships are a mode of engagement and an accelerator). The strategic shifts do not come together in a strategic manner that sets out the interactions and the overall strategic direction of the organization. There is no overall acceleration agenda that explicitly brings together the various elements. At the same time, there is no recognition in the strategic plan that acceleration may not be appropriate in all contexts, such as those where progress towards the 3TRs has been reversed.

The move to more upstream work as an advocate, convenor and broker has an additional challenge in relation to demonstrating the contribution of UNFPA to development change. The importance of monitoring and demonstrating results cannot be understated, if core resources are to continue, but presents a major challenge. Attribution to UNFPA of any change, such as stronger policies on increased financing for sexual and reproductive health, is difficult to quantify because of the myriad factors that can influence such decisions. However, qualitative analysis of the contribution can be assessed through the country programme evaluations,¹⁵³ which are well placed to identify results and what is working in an upstream acceleration agenda.

¹⁵³ Country programme evaluations are conducted by country offices at least once in every two cycles to inform the development of the subsequent programme.



© UNFPA Haiti/Wendy Desert.

In Port-au-Prince, a UNFPA-supported mobile clinic has been transformed into a shelter for internally displaced persons, while continuing to provide crucial maternal health and gender-based violence services through partner health facilities.

5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The five conclusions provided in this section correspond to reasoned judgments of the evaluation team on the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the broader set of three strategic plans from 2018 to 2029. They are based on the findings presented in Section 4 and also take into account discussions held with the evaluation reference group during a validation workshop and subsequent consultations with UNFPA senior management. While the findings generally look back to specific issues, the conclusions identify and reflect issues found across the set of findings and the four evaluation questions.

The recommendations follow logically from the conclusions. In formulating the recommendations, an attempt has been made to focus on issues that are relevant at a high strategic level, rather than on details of UNFPA operationalization of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Specifically, the recommendations are aimed at strengthening the design of the next strategic plan. To promote the utility of the evaluation, a workshop was held with members of the evaluation reference group to co-develop the recommendations. As with the conclusions, the recommendations below take into account discussions with the evaluation reference group and also benefited from engagement with the senior management of UNFPA. All recommendations indicate the unit or units responsible for their implementation and therefore for preparing the specific management response. They also indicate the priority of the recommendation (in terms of timing, importance and scope).

The recommendations also consider the context within which UNFPA will be developing the next strategic plan. Internally, the bold headquarters optimization initiative will bring UNFPA closer to the people it serves but UNFPA is also facing a period of uncertainty over funding. Within the United Nations, the recognition that much needs to be done to achieve the SDGs has led to the Summit of the Future to develop a new narrative to support acceleration towards the goals. The outcome of the Summit combined with the forthcoming QCPR will be a major influence on the next strategic plan.

Conclusion 1: Successive strategic plans aiming for the 3TRs provided continuity and focus but require adaptability, with acceleration remaining relevant yet potentially insufficient for countries facing setbacks.

Derived from findings: 1, 5, 16, 17, 18

Despite some long-term improvements, recent data reveal uneven progress towards the SDGs, the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, and the achievement of the 3TRs, and in some cases reversal. Increasing pushback on the ICPD agenda has had consequences for progress towards the achievement of the 3TRs and associated goals. In many countries, targets are progressing too slowly, and considerable acceleration is still needed to achieve the 3TRs. In other contexts, where there is no progress but reversal, the concept of acceleration may not be appropriate, and efforts need to be made to prevent back-sliding. Strengthening the capacity of countries to protect the ICPD agenda and the UNFPA mandate is crucial.

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

It will be important to provide clearer strategic direction towards outcomes and the 3TRs, as acceleration is critical for achieving UNFPA's goals. Although the focus on accelerating by applying the six accelerators and their related programming strategies to strengthen CPD outputs findings is relevant, and has been largely operationalized, it is limited in scope and does not capture all the elements needed to accelerate progress towards the 3TRs, ICPD Programme of Action and SDGs. Nor will this focus be able to prevent reversal of the progress when and where this occurs.

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

Recommendation 1: Within the overarching framework of contributing to the progress towards the 3TRs, ICDP Programme of Action and the SDGs, focus the next strategic plan on further acceleration and ensure that efforts to protect the ICPD agenda are fully integrated into the approach.

Suggested actions

1.1 To address the critical need to make faster progress towards the 3TRs, ICPD Programme of Action and SDGs, change the overall characterization of the third in the series of strategic plans from “unfinished business” to “continued acceleration”.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional unit: Office of the Executive Director

Due date: Before first presentation of new strategic plan to the Executive Board

1.2 To ensure a coherent, strategic and integrated approach to acceleration, include in the next strategic plan a specific section describing the approaches to acceleration that bring together different areas of work, such as normative work, funding to financing, strategic communications and knowledge management.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional unit: Division of External Relations

Due date: First draft of the strategic plan/April 2025

1.3 To protect the UNFPA's mandate and acceleration agenda against the evolving external environment, include specific actions focused on gender-transformative, human rights-based approaches and social norms.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional unit: Division of External Relations

Due date: First draft of the strategic plan/April 2025

1.4 To ensure the integrated acceleration approach is relevant in humanitarian contexts, define a range of actions that will enable countries in various stages of humanitarian crises to return to a path of acceleration.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional unit: Humanitarian Response Division

Due date: First draft of the strategic plan/April 2025

1.5 To ensure a more strategic and flexible approach to acceleration at the country level, ensure that country offices have the space to define an integrated, country-specific and evidence-based acceleration approach in their CPDs.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional unit: Regional offices

Due date: 31 December 2025

Conclusion 2: The 3TRs effectively focused UNFPA resources on key priorities, but they do not fully encompass all stakeholder needs or UNFPA's broader contributions to SDGs and the ICPD Programme of Action.

Derived from findings: 5, 10

UNFPA's focus on the 3TRs as corporate outcomes has brought clarity to the organization's priorities. However, this focus makes it challenging to capture the direct contributions of core parts of UNFPA's work to the broader ICPD agenda and the SDGs, particularly in the areas of population dynamics, gender equality, HIV and youth.

While the 3TRs remain relevant across the organization, some regions have identified additional priorities that are not fully captured by the current strategic plan. For example, UNFPA's work on demography is valued by the wider United Nations in the delivery of the SDGs beyond those to which UNFPA directly contributes. Other areas that contribute directly to the ICPD Programme of Action and the SDGs include UNFPA's work in gender equality, HIV, youth and adolescence and ageing. While all these areas contribute to the 3TRs, their contribution directly to the ICPD Programme of Action and SDGs may be greater and is not being captured, measured or reported on.

The theory of change diagram ("Overall change story") does not capture these direct contributions but shows that all contributions to the ICPD Programme of Action and SDGs go through the 3TRs. This points to a structural issue in the theory of change of Strategic Plan 2022-2025, where some outputs (such as work on gender and social norms, population change and data, and adolescents and youth) have a direct influence on the ICPD and SDG goals beyond the 3TRs.

At the same time, the importance of the 3TRs, in terms of the distance from achieving them, as well as the strategies required to achieve them, varies significantly across regions. Equally, demand from national governments also varies significantly. While there are examples of regions adapting corporate strategies and messaging to meet regional needs, some regions still face challenges in this respect.

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

Suggested actions

2.1 To ensure that the contribution of all elements of UNFPA's work are understood and captured, revise the strategic plan's theory of change to include direct contributions by UNFPA to the SDGs and ICPD Programme of Action that do not go exclusively through the 3TRs – notably, population dynamics, HIV, adolescence and youth, gender equality and ageing.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Due date: First draft of the strategic plan/April 2025

2.2 To capture the contributions of the specific work on population dynamics and other areas defined above, embed them directly in the framing and narrative of the strategic plan, identify the pathways that contribute directly to the SDGs and ICPD Programme of Action and establish outcome-level indicators and targets to measure and assess progress.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Due date: First draft of the strategic plan/April 2025

2.3 To allow greater alignment of work to regional contexts and demands, clarify the degree to which regional offices can adapt the corporate strategy to better meet the needs of the region while remaining within the overall corporate approach and narrative.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Regional offices

Due date: First draft of the strategic plan/April 2025

2.4 To strengthen efforts on population dynamics and other key areas of work, develop an external relations strategy that includes branding, communications and resource mobilization for these areas.

Lead unit: Division of External Relations

Additional unit: Programme Division

Due date: First draft of the strategic plan/April 2025

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

Derived from findings: 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

The scope of a strategic plan will inevitably result in a degree of complexity and the need for its many parts to be clear, consistent and coherent. This was largely achieved but not totally, with a number of areas not meeting the required levels of coherence or clarity. Within the overall strategic framework, the process of operationalizing the plan also faced similar challenges. While the huge organizational effort that went into the development of the strategic plan can be acknowledged, the operationalization efforts inevitably take time and need to be planned well in advance.

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

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

Suggested actions

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

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Regional offices, Humanitarian Response Division

Due date: 31 December 2025

3.2 To strengthen existing documents to operationalize the strategic plan, enhance coherence across strategies and programme guidance, and ensure similar coherence for any new strategies.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional unit: Humanitarian Response Division

Due date: 31 December 2025

3.3 To ensure timely and contextualized support and guidance for strategic plan implementation, build on the current mid-term review "prioritization exercise" and review the additional support and guidance that will be required in advance of the approval of the strategic plan.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Regional offices

Due date: 31 December 2025

3.4 To ensure increased focus on acceleration at the country level, revise the modes of engagement to align with a new, integrated approach to accelerate progress towards the 3TRs, ICPD Programme of Action and SDGs.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Regional offices

Due date: July 2025

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

Derived from findings: 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 15

All of the strategic shifts are relevant, with some having the potential to greatly accelerate progress on the 3TRs. While the shifts related to leveraging and influencing normative work and ICPD financing are not new concepts, they constitute a change in emphasis and direction. As a result, new or improved strategies, guidance and efforts aimed at changing mindsets and building individual capacity were required, but some were missing or developed only recently.

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

Small country offices face specific challenges in implementing the accelerators and strategic shifts due to constraints in structures, human resources and budget. These offices often have scaled-down versions of larger office structures, with staff double-hatting responsibilities and taking on multiple focal point roles. The focus is often still on project delivery, with less emphasis on the upstream work required by the strategic shifts. Moreover, regional offices, which are expected to provide greater support to small country offices, often appear overstretched.

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

Suggested actions

4.1 To strengthen implementation of an integrated approach to acceleration, develop and roll out staff capacity strengthening initiatives for the critical areas related to acceleration: normative work, funding to finance, knowledge management and strategic communications.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Division for Human Resources, Division of External Relations

Due date: 31 December 2026

4.2 To ensure guidance and capacity-building efforts are tailored to different contexts, enable technical leads to work with regional offices to adapt guidance, as appropriate.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Regional offices, country offices, Humanitarian Response Division

Due date: 31 December 2025

4.3 To promote the most appropriate human resource configurations especially in small offices with limited capacity, facilitate a staffing alignment exercise to ensure the right balance of staff between those with specialization in technical areas and those with expertise in specific modes of engagement. In addition, explore the opportunity to leverage existing resources by making best use of technical resources within regional or subregional technical hubs, or other country offices.

Lead unit: Division for Human Resources

Additional units: Programme Division, regional offices

Due date: 1 July 2026

4.4 To further enhance UNFPA capacity with limited resources, enhance partnerships with providers of relevant knowledge and expertise, including the private sector, civil society and academia.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Regional offices, Division of External Relations

Due date: 31 December 2026

4.5 To ensure a more efficient and coherent approach to specific aspects of UNFPA's work, strengthen staff capacity to articulate UNFPA's contribution to, and engagement with, UN-wide efforts (such as gender norms, youth and adolescents, etc), particularly as it relates to leveraging and advocating for change.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Regional offices

Due date: 31 December 2026

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

Derived from findings: 3, 6, 9, 11, 15

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

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

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

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

Suggested actions

5.1 To support better integration of humanitarian, development and peace-responsive programming at the country level, develop a clear conceptual and operational framework in this area and ensure flexibility to allow for context-specific approaches in the different settings.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Humanitarian Response Division, regional offices

Due date: 31 December 2025

5.2 To increase the support for, and visibility of, UNFPA's work in humanitarian contexts, clearly articulate UNFPA's humanitarian programmatic offer, which should continue to be done within a broader UN response.

Lead unit: Humanitarian Response Division

Additional units: Programme Division, Division of External Relations

Due date: 31 December 2025

5.3 To ensure system coherence, adapt programming and financial processes and procedures to support continuity between development and humanitarian efforts.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Division for Human Resources, Division of Management Services, Supply Chain Management Unit, regional offices

Due date: 31 December 2025

5.4 To reduce the risk of reversing progress towards UNFPA goals, increase efforts aimed at identifying what works in mainstreaming resilience, prevention and early action.

Lead unit: Programme Division

Additional units: Humanitarian Response Division, regional offices

Due date: 31 December 2026

5.5 To ensure a strong UNFPA response to crises and in keeping with recommendations of the evaluation of UNFPA humanitarian capacities and the evaluation of the organizational resilience, strengthen skills and competencies for all UNFPA staff to flexibly engage with varying types and phases of crises.

Lead unit: Division for Human Resources

Additional units: Humanitarian Response Division, Programme Division, regional offices

Due date: 31 December 2027

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At the Zabout refugee camp in Chad, a UNFPA officer is raising awareness about gender-based violence among Sudanese refugees.





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