



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

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Evaluation

Annual report on evaluation, 2020

Summary

The annual report on evaluation presents the status of evaluations undertaken in 2020 by UNDP, the United Nations Capital Development Fund and the United Nations Volunteers programme. It illustrates the approach taken by the three entities to providing relevant evaluative knowledge and lessons learned, despite the challenges posed by the onset of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The report synthesizes key findings from thematic and country evaluations on the work of UNDP and factors affecting its performance. The report highlights the improvement in the quality of UNDP decentralized evaluations, while noting that significant gaps in quantity and scope remain.

Elements of a decision

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



I. Introduction

A. UNDP evaluation response to the COVID-19 pandemic

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the conduct of evaluations in UNDP. With only a few evaluations cancelled, the Independent Evaluation Office adapted rapidly to the new operational environment, adjusting scope and methodology to offset data collection challenges. As field visits would have exposed all stakeholders to high risks, evaluations were conducted virtually. The office conducted extensive interviews with UNDP staff and partners, thorough document review, and secondary data analysis to gather information. Stakeholder surveys and increased reliance on national consultants and think tanks helped address information gaps.
2. To further support decentralized evaluations, the office prepared and updated evaluation guidance notes, as well as a collection of good practices. The office also organized 12 webinars with UNDP regional bureau managers and monitoring and evaluation officers. The webinars saw the participation of over 1,000 UNDP staff and provided an opportunity for guidance on ensuring the evaluability of interventions.
3. To help UNDP better respond to the COVID-19 crisis and support organizational learning, the office published a series of knowledge products – ‘Reflections’ – which offered lessons from past evaluations of UNDP work in crisis settings across a variety of topics. The presentation of the series, in widely attended COVID-19 webinars, allowed for a purposeful discussion, strengthening knowledge management based on evaluative evidence.

B. Engagement with the Executive Board

4. The Independent Evaluation Office continued to engage with the Executive Board as custodian of the evaluation policy. In 2020, it presented to Member States its annual report, 2019; the evaluation of UNDP cooperation in middle-income countries; and the results of the evaluability assessment of the common chapter to the Strategic Plan. The office held consultations with Board members while preparing the evaluation of UNDP Strategic Plan, 2021-2025, and shared 38 independent country programme evaluations to inform the Board in its decision-making ahead of the renewal of country programme documents.

C. Engagement with UNDP senior management

5. The Independent Evaluation Office held frequent and productive sessions on strategic evaluations with the UNDP Executive Group, including on the implications for the cooperation in middle-income countries and the evaluation of the Strategic Plan. These constituted an important opportunity to reinforce the dialogue between the office and UNDP, providing valuable feedback on preliminary evaluation findings and allowing a formative discussion on how the implementation of evaluation recommendations could inform future UNDP work.
6. To create a stronger culture of evaluation, the office identified internal focal points who will regularly interact with the regional bureaus. The focal points will also monitor the implementation of evaluation plans and, in collaboration with the monitoring and evaluation focal points, provide guidance to country offices on decentralized country programme evaluations.
7. The office continued to work closely with the UNDP Nature, Climate and Energy office, which manages the Global Environment Facility (GEF) portfolio. In 2020, the office supported the launch of a new terminal evaluation guidance and ensured that evaluation approaches were aligned with UNDP evaluation standards.

D. Advisory bodies

8. The Director of the Independent Evaluation Office redefined the role of its Evaluation Advisory Panel as a more strategic consultative body. The panel will advise the Director on ways to enhance the utility and credibility of the office, improving outreach and strengthening the UNDP results culture. It will also recommend improvements to the overall coherence and consistency of the Independent Evaluation Office approach and suggest ways to strengthen decentralized evaluations.

9. The Independent Evaluation Office liaised regularly with the Audit and Evaluation Advisory Committee, presenting its work three times in 2020.

E. The Independent Evaluation Office strategy, 2021-2025

10. The Independent Evaluation Office strategy, 2021-2025, sets out the direction of the new leadership of the office with the intention to support UNDP in turning the vision of sustainable and inclusive development into reality. Evaluation in UNDP will continue to be rooted in, and adhere to, the values held dear by the United Nations as expressed in the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development.¹ A realistic evaluation approach will factor in the political economy of development interventions, helping UNDP understand what types of development support work well, for whom, and in what contexts. Evaluations will thus contribute directly to the “leave no one behind” agenda.

11. The broad development mandate of UNDP and the changes brought about by the Secretary General’s reform for the repositioning of the United Nations development system² will require Independent Evaluation Office to evaluate the internal and external coherence of UNDP interventions in line with the revised evaluation criteria adopted by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2019.

12. Recognizing the need for major systemic changes to address complex development challenges, the office will adopt a systemic approach to evaluation, with smarter feedback loops between UNDP evaluation products and processes, closer stakeholder engagement, and the use of information and communications technology for a more efficient use of data.

13. Strengthening decentralized evaluations and national evaluation capacities will remain two priorities of the Independent Evaluation Office, which will also seek to lead the global debate on citizens’ engagement in evaluation, strengthening national and subnational systems for stronger accountability of public action.

II. Independent Evaluation Office evaluations and reviews undertaken in 2020

A. Overview

14. In alignment with its workplan, 2018-2021,³ and the most pressing development needs to which UNDP is called to respond, in 2020 the Independent Evaluation Office conducted six thematic evaluations covering 125 countries through case studies and reviews:

- (a) Evaluation of UNDP cooperation in middle-income countries;

¹ A/RES/75/233

² A/RES/72/279

³ DP/2018/4

- (b) Stemming the tide: an evaluation of UNDP support for climate change adaptation;
- (c) Evaluation of UNDP support to conflict-affected countries;
- (d) Evaluation of UNDP support to the Syrian refugee crisis response and promoting an integrated resilience approach;
- (e) Evaluation of the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2018-2021; and
- (f) Evaluation of the GEF Small Grants Programme.

15. The office conducted 10 independent country programme evaluations and five country programme reviews, covering all the regions and \$2.3 billion of the UNDP budget. To all country offices where these evaluations had been cancelled due to COVID-19, the office provided technical and financial support for country programme evaluations led by country offices.⁴

Table 1
Independent country programme evaluations and reviews, 2020

<i>Region</i>	<i>Evaluations</i>	<i>Reviews</i>
Africa	Chad	Botswana
	South Sudan (ongoing)	United Republic of Tanzania
	Zambia	
Arab States	-	Saudi Arabia
Asia and the Pacific	Viet Nam	Mongolia
Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States	Montenegro	-
Latin America and the Caribbean	Barbados and Eastern Caribbean States	Belize
	Brazil	
	Haiti	
	Honduras	
	Jamaica	

16. Starting from July 2020, the office published nine ‘Reflections’ on UNDP work in crisis settings, covering: social protection; livelihoods restoration and job creation; health; governance; local governance; electoral processes; environment and natural resource management; waste management; and digital transformation.

B. Key findings

17. The following section includes a meta-analysis of findings and lessons learned from thematic evaluations⁵ conducted by the office in 2020; independent country programme evaluations; country programme reviews; and the ‘Reflections’ series. The meta-analysis highlights common results and conclusions against codes identified by the office based on standard evaluation criteria,⁶ attention to equality and inclusion issues, and the most frequent factors affecting performance. The synthesis does not

⁴ In 2020, the office supported five country offices: Algeria, Eritrea, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Morocco, and Suriname.

⁵ The meta-analysis does not include detailed findings from the evaluation of the Strategic Plan, 2018-2021 or from the evaluation of the GEF Small Grants Programme, which were under finalization at the time of drafting the present report.

⁶ OECD Development Assistance Committee, 2019

aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of UNDP work, for which further analysis of UNDP programmes and operations would be required.

UNDP value added

18. UNDP has a long-standing relationship of trust with both governments and communities and is considered a credible and impartial partner. Strong government partnerships have allowed UNDP to work with national and local authorities as an enabler of solutions. UNDP is respected as a transparent organization. Its responsiveness to government requests – as well as procurement processes perceived as faster than average – have increased the request for UNDP development services support, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

19. Its longer-term development perspective puts UNDP in a position to facilitate multidimensional and integrated responses. In both middle-income and conflict-affected countries, its intellectual leadership on human development paradigms and the strong institutional networks enabled by its broad mandate constitute comparative advantages, although limited resources have sometimes challenged substantive engagement in key areas. Comprehensive support to mainstreaming, implementation, monitoring and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals has emerged as a central UNDP offering, particularly in middle-income countries. UNDP has expanded country-level awareness in this area, but further work is required to effectively develop integrated strategies for achievement of the goals.

20. UNDP value added also lies in its ability to provide technical advice, leveraging its global network and brokering knowledge across country offices to bolster local capabilities. UNDP has filled important capacity gaps at the country level, although reliance on outsourced expertise must not come at the expense of building sustainable national institutions. Embedding technical experts with national counterparts has proved effective in transferring skills and institutionalizing programme outcomes.

21. UNDP has valuably promoted South-South and triangular cooperation – particularly among Small Islands Developing States – to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, but exchanges between countries could be further explored. While cooperation initiatives have been numerous, the absence of an effective knowledge management system resulted in missed opportunities to systematically transfer learning.

22. Its continued presence in the field and its geographic outreach give UNDP an advantage, facilitating a prompt and effective response. Concrete work with rights-holders on the ground helps guarantee UNDP a seat at the negotiating table and boosts its credibility as an organization that can produce results relatively quickly.

23. In crisis contexts, UNDP supported accountable and inclusive local systems, restoring services and infrastructure and fostering social cohesion in divided communities. Its early positioning in rapid-onset crises enabled it to better address development challenges and mitigate the impact of refugee flows.

UNDP strategic positioning

24. Thematic and country programme evaluations highlighted a number of results achieved across UNDP signature solutions, as well as areas for improvement.

25. UNDP effectively supported transparent and credible electoral processes, improved rule of law, citizen security, and access to justice. UNDP assistance in the area of governance to promote digital solutions and capacity development for evidence-based policy planning and implementation could be strengthened, with some stakeholders advocating for larger involvement of UNDP at the highest political levels. UNDP work at the local level was pivotal in building capacity, but it should be expanded beyond service delivery.

26. Across development contexts, UNDP promoted strategies for inclusive growth and poverty reduction. Support through employment creation was valuable, but mostly short-term and of limited scale. As part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNDP should enhance its support at the meso and macro levels, partnering with the private sector and financial institutions to improve sustainability. In several countries, pilot projects brought tangible benefits to rights-holders in a short time frame, but they had limited impact when not accompanied by upstream work addressing longer-term policy and institutional changes.

27. The involvement of UNDP in natural resource management and climate change adaptation supported the implementation of global commitments and helped mitigate country vulnerability, particularly in small island developing States. Natural resource management initiatives frequently involved local communities, including through benefit-sharing and payment for ecosystem services. UNDP work on agriculture and food security as part of the climate change adaptation portfolio focused mainly on Africa, where smallholders have been particularly vulnerable to climate variability.

28. Funding availability made it difficult to place adequate emphasis on preventative measures and medium- to long-term adaptation. Engagement in the renewable energy sector was limited and could be further promoted, with a focus on access for vulnerable communities.

29. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted programmes in many countries, it also presented an opportunity for UNDP to expand its thought leadership and help development partners build back better and more sustainably. Under the aegis of the United Nations resident coordinators, UNDP led United Nations efforts in the preparation of socio-economic impact assessments and response plans, working in cooperation with other entities and programmes. Through core resources, dedicated funds and redirected project funds, UNDP provided protective equipment for essential workers, procured health supplies, and – to varying degrees – supported vulnerable workers and small and medium-sized enterprises.

Integrated approaches

30. UNDP programmes struggled to systemically integrate approaches with balanced consideration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions. A lack of processes to support a more integrated approach to planning and programming often resulted in simultaneous responses to multiple drivers. Evaluations highlighted opportunities for further synergies between the economic development and environmental conservation portfolios, as well as with regard to the intersection of conflict, climate change, and displacement. In conflict-affected countries, UNDP worked on separate drivers of insecurity and tension, but in a compartmentalized manner. UNDP efforts to enhance community resilience were short-term and did not always result in a coherent and significant contribution to conflict prevention.

31. Evaluations found limited examples of adequate application of the theory of change as a tool to articulate the contribution of activities and outputs to country programme outcomes and model programme capacity. Fragmented interventions affected the ability of UNDP to provide the scale and continuity of efforts needed for transformative change. Pilots often lacked carefully designed steps to evaluate and communicate results to relevant stakeholders, as well as mechanisms to support the inclusion of lessons learned in sector programmes, plans and decision-making. Umbrella or multi-phased programmes, facilitated by long-term financial engagement with governments or vertical funds, allowed interventions to be adjusted based on preliminary results, promoting coherence, continuity, and sustainability.

Leaving no one behind

32. To respond to the pledge of leaving no one behind, UNDP promoted context analysis and programmes addressing issues of social inclusion and respect for diversity. Some of the efforts are still in the early stages, but a lack of disaggregated data already presents challenges to understanding progress in addressing the needs of those left behind.

33. UNDP has made gender equality and women's empowerment a strategic priority, developed sufficient institutional guidance and tools to mainstream gender in programmes, and established an accountability system to track its performance. The sum of these efforts, however, has not yet culminated in tangible gender-responsive programming, much less in gender-transformative results on the ground. Although women were proportionately represented as beneficiaries across interventions, programmes often did not address structural barriers to gender equality and women's empowerment, with gender stereotyping not adequately challenged at times. Insufficient staff and financial resources, as well as limited strategic partnerships – which resulted in inadequate integration of gender at the programme design stage – played a contributing role.

34. In middle-income countries, UNDP work on human rights has led to significant achievements in strengthening institutional frameworks and spaces for the protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, indigenous communities, migrants, and trafficked persons. In some cases, support to the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community would have required further sensitization to promote policy and behavioral changes. Particularly in conflict-affected countries, the limited political space to work on human rights sometimes constrained the effectiveness of the UNDP contribution.

Innovation and technological advancements

35. The elevation of innovation in the Strategic Plan was followed by sizeable investments in growing existing capabilities and mainstreaming innovation efforts across the organization. While still at an early stage, the Accelerator Lab network is generating greater exposure for social innovation techniques and digital technologies at the country level, setting the basis for a more participatory and contextualized approach to development. However, the process through which demonstrated techniques and tools are integrated and scaled into service offers has not yet been sufficiently institutionalized.

36. Leveraging new technologies is increasingly critical to achieving results. Across development settings, UNDP promoted the use of information technology to help decision-making, adding a level of sophistication to UNDP operational support. Technology-enabled solutions were more effective, efficient, and sustainable when they included local adaptation, were accompanied by capacity development initiatives, and involved collaboration with local innovators to spark home-grown experimentation. Limited access to technology and infrastructure, and/or low literacy levels, made it more difficult to reach women and vulnerable groups, including people living with disabilities. Ethical issues that may require government regulation are potential future areas for UNDP investment.

Cooperation and partnerships

37. Strategic partnerships are essential for UNDP to be able to deliver beyond its own capacity and resources. Partnerships are more effective when UNDP has an integrated framework for cooperation in place, with clearly defined leadership, roles, and responsibilities. Where such frameworks allow UNDP to partner with non-traditional actors (such as youth peer educators or religious leaders), results are often

amplified. Independent Evaluation Office evaluations have found mixed evidence of UNDP strategic engagement with non-State actors. Partnerships have frequently been limited in scope and, in some cases, opportunities to include the perspectives of marginalized communities have been missed.

38. UNDP participated in several joint programmes with other United Nations organizations, particularly concerning social development issues, where the complementarities and comparative strengths of the other organizations were optimized. Joint programming has been more sporadic in the area of environment and climate change, with some stakeholders considering vertical funding a disincentive to coordination. Financial incentives linked to the Sustainable Development Goals process, donors' calls for greater cooperation, and considerations on how to support national decision-making through collective actions, promoted cooperation.

39. There is scope for UNDP to further systematize partnerships at strategic and programmatic levels, grounded in a deeper understanding of respective strengths. An institutional agreement with the United Nations Environment Programme to advance national adaptation plans, the Global Focal Point for Rule of Law, and the joint Framework for Action with the International Labour Organization are good examples. The partnership between UNDP and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) brought a resilience perspective to the Syrian refugee crisis response. UNDP and UNHCR played a key coordination role, a formidable task given the large scale of response.

40. UNDP engagement with international financial institutions in middle-income countries has expanded in recent years, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean and with a focus on crisis prevention and peacebuilding. As the role of international financial institutions in crisis contexts expands, it will be important to identify opportunities and modalities of engagement for successful collaboration. The role of UNDP as a provider of technical assistance and trusted intermediary in the implementation of loans provided by international financial institutions is to be further explored.

Resources

41. Despite the challenging financial context, UNDP has sustained a stable influx of non-core resources and an increase in regular resources. It nimbly mobilized and repurposed funds to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

42. With a few exceptions, development financing in middle-income countries remains a constraint, limiting the ability of UNDP to plan long-term interventions. While reflecting strong national ownership, increased government cost-sharing to fund programmes challenged UNDP coherence and flexibility. This was reflected in interventions not always driven by theories of change and comprehensive diagnoses. Potential political sensitivities caused under-representation of some areas of importance to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Several country offices have seen government allocations delayed, with fluctuations from one year to another contributing to a 'projectized' approach.

43. The dependency of UNDP on external resources challenges its ability to respond to development needs, particularly in areas other than climate change and natural resources management. Limited flexible funding outside projects constrained its capacity to develop holistic and integrated responses and leverage substantial policy and system changes. Resource challenges were often reflected in thinly stretched programmatic support by UNDP staff.

44. The need to attract resources drove a progressively larger involvement of the private sector, but companies were considered mainly as funders rather than potential investors.

Results-based management

45. Despite new approaches to quality assurance, the UNDP results-based management system remains inadequate. Issues with global-level monitoring and reporting make it difficult to discern whether, and to what extent, UNDP tools and support have been effective in achieving results and accelerating the Sustainable Development Goals. In the areas of climate change adaptation and resilience, UNDP has not effectively captured the results and impact of its investment, or the scope of its influence beyond project boundaries. Establishing mechanisms to bolster the rigour of design and measure results will increase the potential for learning, promoting the uptake of effective models at scale.

46. At the country level, the country programme results framework often failed to provide a full reflection of results targeted and achieved, particularly at the outcome level, and were seldom revised to reflect changing national priorities. The adoption of United Nations Development Assistance Framework indicators did not allow an assessment of UNDP contributions, nor did these provide a valid reflection of targeted behavioral change. At the project level, reporting remained focused on individual activities and outputs, lacking a deeper analysis of transformative effects. The allocation of dedicated monitoring and evaluation resources was important in enhancing the quality of the system.

C. Independent Evaluation Office evaluation quality and use

47. In 2020, the Independent Evaluation Office strengthened its quality assurance approach. The revised system combines a structured process of internal peer review and external appraisal by newly appointed advisors, comprising over 50 high-level global and regional experts.

48. To better understand the needs of Independent Evaluation Office stakeholders, collect feedback on current products and services, and enhance the utility of its work, in June 2020 the office launched an online survey targeting 736 stakeholders, including members of the Executive Board, UNDP staff, and other United Nations evaluation personnel, as well as representatives of academia and civil society.

49. Over 60 per cent of the respondents were satisfied with all the attributes outlined in the survey. The credibility, independence, and competence of the Independent Evaluation Office were rated the highest. Survey respondents indicated several strengths of its products, including accessibility, for independent country programme evaluations; readability, for thematic evaluations; and objective reporting and analysis, for annual reports. Evaluation guidelines were rated the most consulted product. Stakeholders suggested that the office could expand its work by conducting impact evaluations, exploring the use of artificial intelligence, and providing additional guidance and training for monitoring and evaluation officers. Stakeholders' suggestions were integrated into the strategy for 2021-2025.

50. Beyond the continued development of the Evaluation Resource Centre, the Independent Evaluation Office investigated how to apply information and communications technology to strengthen evaluation. In 2020, the office started a project focused on the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning to gather evaluative evidence, the results of which will be integrated into a more ambitious cross-sectional digital solutions project later in 2021.

51. The stakeholder survey showed that perceptions of the work of the Independent Evaluation Office ultimately depend on the quality of its recommendations. Around 80 per cent of respondents perceived the recommendations as clear, impartial, and well-substantiated. The analysis of 2019 recommendations implementation showed that the evaluations had contributed to the definition of strategies and programme documents, advocating for a more consistent use of theories of change framing the

contribution of individual initiatives to programmatic goals. Independent country programme evaluations helped country offices adjust their programmatic efforts for enhanced relevance, advocating for a stronger involvement around issues of governance, local development, and inclusion to leave no one behind. The implementation of recommendations contributed to strengthening country office planning and monitoring systems, with closer attention paid to design and resources.

52. The analysis, however, showed a reduction in the extent to which actions indicated in the management response were timely completed or reported. Fifty-nine per cent of the actions recommended in 2018 thematic evaluations still appeared as overdue or not initiated. In the case of independent country programme evaluations, the percentage of actions overdue diminished from 71 per cent in 2017 to 32 per cent in 2019, although only 24 per cent of actions had been completed. To address this, in 2020 Independent Evaluation Office regional focal points started participating in programme appraisal committees to ensure that evaluation recommendations were properly considered in the formulation of the new country programme documents. The creation of a formal reporting mechanism to the Executive Board on the implementation of recommendations from strategic and thematic evaluations may also contribute to the timely implementation of actions.

III. Oversight and support to decentralized evaluation

A. Investment in evaluation

53. UNDP country offices spent \$12.3 million on evaluation during 2020. This included evaluation implementation costs (\$6 million), staff costs (\$5.4 million) and additional evaluation-related costs (\$0.9 million).⁷ Expenditure at headquarters and by regional bureaus in implementing, supporting, and overseeing evaluation amounted to \$2.2 million, including evaluation costs (\$0.4 million) and staff (\$1.8 million).

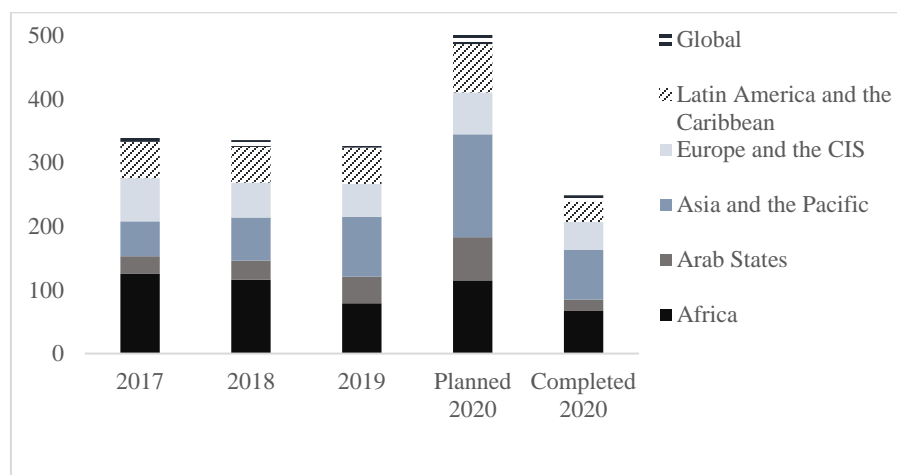
B. Decentralized evaluation implementation, quality, and use

54. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the implementation of decentralized evaluations. In 2020, UNDP completed 249 evaluations – about half the number planned at the beginning of the year⁸ and fewer (-26 per cent) than the average number conducted in 2017-2019. The largest gaps were recorded in the Arab States and in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Asia and the Pacific, though, UNDP was able to conduct a higher-than-average number of evaluations despite the pandemic-related challenges to data collection.

⁷ Staff time allocations for evaluation and additional evaluation costs are self-reported through the results-oriented annual report. Staff costs for evaluation are calculated by UNDP based on those self-reported figures. Evaluation implementation costs are taken from the Evaluation Resource Centre and are also self-reported and entered by programme units.

⁸ UNDP had planned to conduct 504 decentralized evaluations in 2020. Source: Evaluation Resource Centre, February 2020.

Figure 1
UNDP decentralized evaluations, 2017-2020



Source: UNDP Evaluation Resource Centre

55. A significant number of countries (48) did not conduct any evaluations in 2020, and 28 conducted only one. While the share of countries covered by evaluations was very high in Asia and the Pacific (96 per cent) and remained quite stable in Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (73 per cent), around half of the countries in the Arab States, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean were not covered by any evaluation in 2020.

56. The Independent Evaluation Office continued to be concerned that UNDP is not conducting evaluations to capture lessons and results across its portfolios. In 2020, project evaluations represented 93 per cent of decentralized evaluations carried out by UNDP. Of those, 45 per cent covered GEF-funded projects. While the 2020 reduction in evaluation coverage was felt across all types of evaluations, the repercussions were greater on outcome and thematic evaluations – which already represented a smaller proportion of the UNDP evaluation portfolio – reducing opportunities for learning related to the achievement of strategic results.

57. The quality assessment scores showed an overall improvement in the quality of decentralized evaluations.⁹ A third of the evaluation reports (58, or 33.7 per cent) were rated satisfactory – a 10 per cent increase compared to 2019 – and another 54.7 per cent (94 reports) moderately satisfactory. Twelve per cent (20 reports) were rated moderately unsatisfactory or unsatisfactory, about 15 per cent lower than 2019. About 43 per cent of decentralized evaluations in the Asia and the Pacific region were rated satisfactory, with a significant improvement in report quality.

58. As with strategic and country programme evaluations, the implementation of recommendations from decentralized evaluations was delayed. In 2017-2019, the share of recommendations fully implemented diminished from 84 per cent to 59 per cent, while the percentage of overdue actions increased from 3 per cent to 15 per cent. Preliminary figures for 2020 confirmed the negative trend, with an average of 29 per cent of recommendations not yet initiated or overdue (particularly in Africa).

59. To promote the recognition and the use of high-quality decentralized evaluations, in 2020 the Independent Evaluation Office launched the Evaluation Excellence Awards, which grant recognition to decentralized evaluations in three

⁹ The Independent Evaluation Office quality-assessed 172 decentralized evaluations undertaken in 2020.

categories: outstanding evaluation; innovative evaluation; and gender-responsive evaluation. The initiative will continue in 2021.

C. Decentralized evaluation support

60. Independent Evaluation Office support to decentralized evaluations in 2020 focused on helping country and regional offices adapt to the challenges of managing evaluations in the context of COVID-19 (see chapter I, section A of this report). The office has updated the evaluation guidelines for country offices to reflect the changes brought about by the 2019 evaluation policy; further integrate gender equality and women's empowerment and disability considerations; and consider how the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework will affect the evaluation of UNDP work at the country level. The updated guidelines will be available later in 2021

61. Following the regional training roll-out, the office launched two training courses: a mandatory certified course for all UNDP staff planning to implement and manage evaluations, and a shorter training introducing the evaluation requirements of the organization. By the end of 2020, 579 staff had completed the courses.

62. The office contributed to strengthening capacities for decentralized evaluations by offering 10 scholarships to attend, virtually, the International Programme for Development Evaluation Training in 2020.

63. The office provided decentralized offices with suggestions on how to effectively search for quality evaluation consultants in the Evaluation Resource Centre database by area of expertise. As of February 2021, the database included 144 experts.

D. Gender-responsive evaluations

64. The Independent Evaluation Office continued strengthening the capacity of evaluations to track effective and transformative outcomes for gender equality and women's empowerment through training and guidance. In 2020, the office fine-tuned a methodology note on the Gender Results Effectiveness Scale, advising evaluators on how to implement a gender-responsive analysis of results. The five-scale rating enables assessment of the extent to which UNDP has effectively contributed to the achievement of norm- and power-shifting results, providing a nuanced understanding of programme implementation and factors affecting performance.

65. The office incorporated the evaluation performance indicator of the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women into its online quality assessment system. In 2020, the evaluation performance indicator mean evaluation score was 6.5, signalling that UNDP evaluations overall met the action plan requirements. UNDP received three additional points for having conducted an evaluation of the UNDP contribution to gender equality and women's empowerment in 2015. The indicators for both independent and decentralized evaluations improved compared to scores registered in the previous three years.

Table 2
United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women evaluation performance indicator meta score, UNDP evaluations, 2017-2020

	<i>2017</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020</i>
All evaluations	5.30	5.10	5.33	9.51
Approaches requirements	Approaches requirements	Approaches requirements	Approaches requirements	Exceeds requirements

Independent evaluations	7 Meets requirements	6.79 Meets requirements	7 Meets requirements	7.19 Meets requirements
Decentralized evaluations	4.60 Approaches requirements	4.58 Approaches requirements	5.01 Approaches requirements	6.20 Approaches requirements

IV. The United Nations Capital Development Fund and the United Nations Volunteers programme

A. United Nations Capital Development Fund

66. In 2020, the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) spent a total of \$588,645 on evaluation (0.75 per cent of programmatic expenditure) and maintained three dedicated professional staff. The Evaluation Unit completed the joint midterm evaluation of the global UNDP, UN-Women and UNCDF Inclusive and Equitable Local Development programme – which supports the economic empowerment of women in least developed countries in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa – and the evaluation of the Expanding Financial Access programme in Myanmar. In 2020, the Evaluation Unit started a combined evaluation of the UNCDF Strategic Framework and gender policy; the final evaluation of the Merchants Development Driving Rural Markets project in Bangladesh; and the midterm evaluation of the Jobs, Skills and Finance programme in the Gambia.

67. The Inclusive and Equitable Local Development programme evaluation confirmed the relevance of the approach to local governments, small and medium-sized enterprises, and women micro-entrepreneurs. While training enhanced awareness and skills in gender-responsive budgeting and planning, the evaluation considered that the roll-out of inclusive and equitable local development tools and expanded partnerships could lead to more catalytic results in the future. Recommendations included the need for better outcome results monitoring as well as a review of the investment support process for smaller enterprises to increase efficiency. The evaluation also concluded that more attention should be paid to ensuring joint decision-making.

68. The Expanding Financial Access programme evaluation emphasized the success of the programme as a platform to support the national financial inclusion strategy. The evaluation highlighted the results achieved in terms of the financial inclusion of women and minorities, and the increased size of loans provided by microfinance institutions. The evaluation recommended closer programme engagement with the Government and the broader financial inclusion sector. The evaluation also recommended strengthening the programme team to meet the needs of the expanding range of partners supported; paying greater attention to monitoring, communication, and knowledge management; and increasing the use of in-country mechanisms in the interaction with UNCDF headquarters.

69. UNCDF continued to prioritize strengthening the quality and range of its evaluations, as well as efforts to build an evaluation culture within the organization. To increase the efficiency and effectiveness of its procurement processes, in 2020 the Evaluation Unit established a long-term agreement with six internationally reputed evaluation firms. Across UNCDF, it continued supporting managers in the design of results frameworks and monitoring tools that could more readily yield performance information against UNCDF objectives. The Evaluation Unit helped UNCDF prepare for a counterfactual impact evaluation of its Boosting Green Employment and Enterprise Opportunities in Ghana programme, which is being commissioned by the European Union and started in 2021.

70. In 2020, UNCDF increased its participation in the work of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG). The head of the UNCDF Evaluation Unit was elected a Vice Chair of the Group, while evaluation staff co-led an interest group on evaluation methods and convened the Working Group on Peer Reviews.

B. United Nations Volunteers

71. The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme budget for evaluation in 2020 was \$188,000, drawn from core and non-core funds. The budget covered four decentralized evaluations, as well as the costs of the evaluation team at UNV headquarters.

72. The midterm review of UNV Strategic Framework, 2018-2020, concluded that the organizational transformation undertaken in 2018-2019 had unleashed the capacity of UNV to deliver. The global restructuring and regionalization, the professionalization of country-level capacity, the diversification of volunteer modalities and the UNV talent pool, as well as the streamlining of business processes, all strengthened the focus and agility of the organization, leading to record numbers of United Nations Volunteers. Based on the midterm review, UNV revised its results framework by updating the targets that had already been achieved and introducing a gender equality indicator. In October 2020, UNV started the final evaluation of its Strategic Framework (expected in the second quarter of 2021), which will provide lessons learned and actionable recommendations for the next Strategic Framework period, 2022-2025.

73. Supported by the Independent Evaluation Office, UNV continued to provide technical support and quality assurance to decentralized evaluations. In 2020, the evaluation of the Talent and Capacity Development Programme for an Inclusive United Nations System for Persons with Disabilities recommended the implementation of a theory of change for new inclusion approaches, awareness-raising among United Nations entities and the community of persons with disabilities, and capacity development for host entities. UNV commissioned the final evaluations of UNV support to the Gender Promotion Initiative of the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, the UNV Online Volunteering service, and a joint project on volunteerism in Cambodia as a tool to increase youth employability.

74. Under the present Strategic Framework, UNV has transitioned from project implementation to facilitating advisory services. While only a limited number of projects remains to be evaluated, UNV is committed to widening the space for joint thematic and impact evaluations that consider UNV contributions to results.

V. Advancing global evaluation culture and practice

A. The Global Evaluation Initiative and other contributions

75. In 2020, the Independent Evaluation Office and the World Bank Independent Evaluation Group agreed to pool efforts and expertise in the area of evaluation capacity development to develop country-owned, sustainable monitoring and evaluation systems so as to promote the use of evidence in public decision-making, enhance accountability, and achieve better results. The Global Evaluation Initiative seeks to foster a culture where monitoring and evaluation is valued and used globally. Leveraging local, regional, and global knowledge and expertise, support will be provided to strengthening the monitoring and evaluation frameworks and capacities of government and other stakeholders in partner countries.

76. The Global Evaluation Initiative builds on the strengths of existing initiatives, such as the Centres for Learning on Evaluation and Results; the International Programme for Development Evaluation and Training; and the flagship National

Evaluation Capacities Conference series of the Independent Evaluation Office. To scale up the programmes and create global synergies, the initiative has established partnerships with the evaluation functions of a broad range of multilateral development banks, international organizations, and research and evaluation institutions. Funding partners include the Governments of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

77. In 2020, the Independent Evaluation Office contributed to the gLOCAL Evaluation Week organized by the Centres for Learning on Evaluation and Results, to promote evidence-based decision-making and strengthen development outcomes at the local and global levels. Independent Evaluation Office evaluators shared reflections from evaluation work in conflict contexts, national evaluation systems in post-conflict societies, and national evaluation diagnostics systems.

78. The office produced the proceedings of the 2019 conference on national evaluation capacities. The report showcased 20 papers from over 30 authors, and included diverse topics on emerging evaluation priorities and issues such as human development and inequalities; the role of evaluation in leaving no one behind; lessons and good practices from countries strengthening their national evaluation systems; and transforming evaluation to help transform development.

B. The United Nations Evaluation Group

79. The Independent Evaluation Office continued to contribute actively to the work of UNEG, in which the Director of the office assumed one of the Vice-Chairmanship positions in 2020. By participating in 15 working/interest groups, Independent Evaluation Office staff contributed to enhancing professionalization and capacity development through training and guidance. Multiple webinars on gender, codes of conduct, and data analysis tools for innovation in evaluation were organized as part of the UNEG Evaluation Practice Exchange and the Partnership Forum with the OECD Evaluation Network. The office contributed to updating the 2008 Ethical guidelines and developing tools to enhance the evaluability of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. Two staff participated in a meta-synthesis of United Nations contributions to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 6, one of the first pilot exercises to reflect on the coherence and coordination of the efforts of United Nations entities to promote clean water and sanitation for all.

80. The office took a leadership role in joint efforts to evaluate the United Nations support to the COVID-19 response, including the UNEG working group on COVID-19 and the system-wide multi-partner trust fund COVID-19 working group. The office is represented in the core management and reference group of the COVID-19 global evaluation coalition of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, which aims to provide credible evaluative evidence to inform the international response to COVID-19 in programme countries.

VI. Staffing and finances, 2020

A. Independent Evaluation Office staffing

81. The structural arrangements of the office continued to operate successfully, with staff working across sections to make sure that evaluations drew on diverse insights. In 2020, Independent Evaluation Office staff comprised 31 posts. To meet the additional demands in the upcoming evaluative cycle, the office increased the capacity of the professional team through five additional temporary appointment posts for evaluation specialists. This allowed the allocation of adequate resources to further support country offices and strengthen decentralized evaluations through the creation of regional focal points.

82. A cost-benefit analysis of options for additional support at regional and country levels will be prepared during the third quarter of 2021, for implementation beginning in 2022.

B. Independent Evaluation Office budget

83. In 2020, in line with the Evaluation Policy, 2019, the office received an increment of 0.1 per cent as a financial allocation. Of the \$13.48 million annual budget approved by the Executive Board at its first regular session 2020, the office spent \$11.24 million (83.4 per cent) on evaluations and other institutional activities, with the totality allocated from core resources. As travel traditionally represents nearly 45 per cent of evaluation expenditures, the office worked to repurpose travel funds after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Resources were allocated to strengthen internal processes and explore data collection alternatives, resulting in a stronger use of national consultants and local think tanks, as well as the design of an artificial intelligence-based system for data analysis and lessons learned extraction, to be finalized later in 2021.

84. The office continued to partner strategically and selectively with governments and external development agencies in advancing the evaluation mandate and function beyond the core work programme. In 2020, the office deepened its partnership with the Government of Switzerland to support the participation of three UNDP regional monitoring and evaluation staff in training at the International Programme for Development Evaluation and Training, thus reinforcing the capacity for decentralized evaluations.

85. Since 2017, overall evaluation resources have increased from 0.48 per cent to 0.57 per cent of UNDP (core and non-core) programme utilization.¹⁰ Despite the improvement, there is still a significant gap to reach the 1 per cent prescribed in the UNDP evaluation policy, 2019.¹¹

Table 3
UNDP evaluation resources

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Independent Evaluation Office expenditures	9.0	8.7	10.9	11.2
Decentralized evaluations	12.7	13.3	14.8	14.5
Total resources UNDP evaluation function	21.8	22.0	25.7	25.7
Share of UNDP programme resources to evaluation	0.48	0.48	0.58	0.57

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

86. In 2021, based on the UNDP budget allocation model, the Independent Evaluation Office expects to receive a financial allocation of \$12 million.

¹⁰ Based on expenditures figures provided by UNDP, March 2020.

¹¹ DP/2019/29

C. Programme of work, 2021

87. In 2021, the office will carry out 19 independent country programme evaluations,¹² three thematic evaluations, and two synthesis reports on UNDP work in the Sahel and in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

88. The office will continue reinforcing the dialogue with UNDP bureaus, regional hubs, and country offices, and will build evaluation capacities through training and guidance. It will fully develop the Global Evaluation Initiative and work on the preparation of the National Evaluation Conference, 2022.

Table 4

Independent Evaluation Office work planned to be presented to the Executive Board in 2021-2022

<i>Session</i>	<i>Independent Evaluation Office report</i>
Annual session 2021	Annual report on evaluation (for information) Strategic Plan, 2018-2021 (for decision) GEF Small Grants Programme (for decision)
First regular session 2022	Clean affordable energy (for decision) Youth empowerment and employment (for decision)
Annual session 2022	Annual report on evaluation (for information) Financing the recovery from COVID-19 (for decision)

¹² Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Sudan (Africa); Djibouti, Egypt, and the Programme of Assistance to Palestinian People (Arab States); India, Myanmar, Nepal, and the Pacific Multi-Country Office (Asia and the Pacific); Moldova and Ukraine (Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States); Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru (Latin America and the Caribbean).