

Formative Evaluation of the UNFPA Innovation Initiative



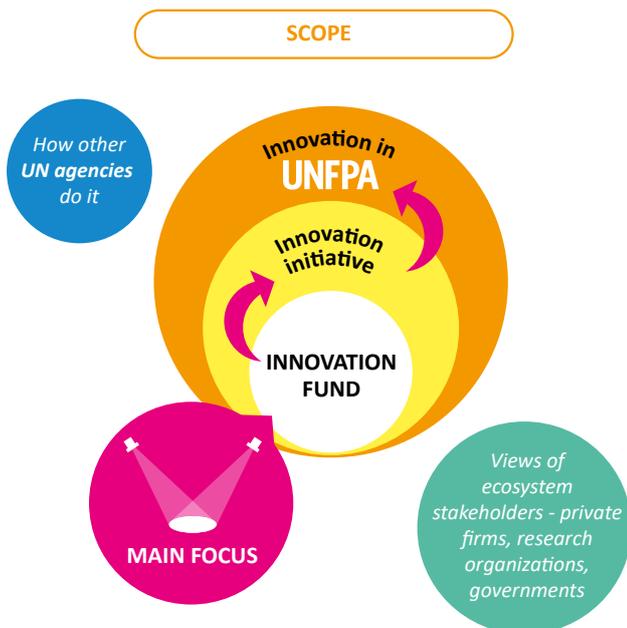
UNFPA Evaluation Office

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THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of the evaluation was to conduct an evidence based, consultative and participative formative evaluation of the UNFPA Innovation Initiative. The objectives were to provide learning inputs to managers on implementing the first phase of the Innovation Initiative; improving programme design, processes and systems; and informing the next Strategic Plan and UNFPA strategies in innovation.

The evaluation was responsive to the institutional context, allowing real-time feedback to programme staff and facilitating a continuous adaptive loop to decision-making needs. The results of the exercise informed the development of the new Strategic Plan and new innovation strategy. This was the first formative evaluation conducted at UNFPA, an important pilot in terms of an innovative approach to evaluation. The exercise has taken place at a strategic time for UNFPA in terms of defining the role of innovation in the coming years to address pressing development issues.



The evaluation began in June 2016 and was completed in August 2017. It covered all UNFPA field offices and business units in headquarters. The main focus of the evaluation was on the Innovation Fund, as a main funding mechanism of the Innovation Initiative. The scope of the exercise included the performance of the Innovation Fund; the links between the Innovation Fund and the Innovation Initiative; the links between the Innovation Initiative and innovation in UNFPA; and how other UN agencies approach and implement innovation. The evaluation included a comparative study of the status of innovation across 10 UN agencies - the first to be undertaken in the UN system - which was used to generate insights for UNFPA.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS



APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed a mixed, multi-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data and methods of analysis. The evaluation was utilization focused. The methodology made extensive use of comparative analysis, systematically comparing UNFPA with other UN agencies, and UNFPA offices with different degrees of involvement in the Innovation Fund.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusion 1. The Innovation Initiative and the Innovation Fund have been key contributors to positioning innovation and generating a drive to innovate in UNFPA by creating awareness and jumpstarting the process towards nurturing a culture of innovation. The Innovation Fund has positioned innovation across the organization at the country, regional and headquarters levels. It has also helped lift the profile of innovation in the UNFPA corporate agenda and generated the perception among staff and external actors of a determined move towards innovation in the organization. The Innovation Fund fostered an exploratory process that generated meaningful institutional learning for a UNFPA approach to innovation.

Conclusion 2. The Innovation Fund managed to deliver promising innovative solutions, some of which have had tangible effects on women and youth such as the portable mobile learning system in Tanzania and Ethiopia, the approach introduced in mobilizing young people for social cohesion in Syria, and the mobile health iLoveLive.mobi platform in South Africa.

Conclusion 3. The Initiative has provided an added impetus to the organizational uptake of innovation. However, despite some attempts it has not yet become a corporate vision for innovation in UNFPA. Currently, pivotal operational decisions need to be made in relation to the innovation model to be followed at UNFPA. However, a shared strategic vision on innovation guiding these decisions is not yet in place.

Conclusion 4. Despite the enthusiasm and impulse generated by the Innovation Fund, a series of hindering factors linked to staff incentives and policies hamper further progress towards a culture of innovation. The main ones are: insufficient time to innovate; innovation is seen as an additional incidental task; inadequate capacity in terms of the innovation skill sets of staff; insufficient buy-in from senior management (in field offices and business units); and the current absence of reporting requirements on innovation. Another recurrent obstacle is the disincentives to assuming risks and embracing failure in a context where these extra efforts usually go unacknowledged and unrecognized by managers and supervisors.

Conclusion 5. The Innovation Initiative and Innovation Fund are not well connected to the rest of the organization. This disconnect occurs with business units that play a role in the enabling environment for innovation and with other innovation activities beyond those supported by the Innovation Fund.

Conclusion 6. There are issues with the current approach of the Innovation Initiative to human resources. The Innovation Fund's achievements are considerable given the limited number of staff fully dedicated to innovation. Staff constraints hinder the development of a sustainable model to foster innovation in UNFPA. Innovation staffing levels in UNFPA are low when compared to other UN agencies.

Conclusion 7. Innovation-focused partnerships have played a smaller role than expected, with implications for the UNFPA approach to innovation. The Innovation Initiative, including the Innovation Fund, has been characterized by traditional partnerships with implementing partners. Ties with innovation ecosystem players at the country, regional and headquarters levels have been modest. The factors explaining the moderate role of innovation specific partnerships include low incentives to pursue non-traditional partnerships, insufficient time to develop partnerships, short time-frames for submitting proposals and preference for internal crowd-sourcing.

Conclusion 8. Current monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, which have proved inadequate for innovation projects, are one of the ultimate causes behind limitations

in accruing learning, limitations adopting fail-fast approaches and limited progress in building a UNFPA brand for innovation. M&E mechanisms for innovation projects supported by the Innovation Fund have followed the same logic than those for regular projects. However, iteration and learning when testing innovative solutions is associated with real-time outcome-based monitoring systems and capturing unintended outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Recommendation 1. UNFPA should make critical strategic decisions in order to frame the foundations for its corporate approach to innovation.

These critical decisions include determining: the specific areas innovation should prioritize and focus upon; how innovation should be positioned inside the organization; how UNFPA wants to position itself within the innovation ecosystem; what forms of innovation (e.g. products, services, processes) UNFPA should focus on (and how); and what stages of innovation (ideation, testing, scale up) UNFPA wants to support (and how).

Recommendation 2. Further develop the innovation business case into an innovation corporate framework for the next four years and revisit and reactivate the Inter Divisional Working Group on innovation.

The corporate framework on innovation should reflect an organization-wide basis for a common understanding of the innovation model for the next four years, alongside the Strategic Plan. This corporate framework should add to the Business Case a brief theory of change and an M&E mechanism to capture learning and to allow an evaluation of the Innovation Initiative by 2021.

Recommendation 3. Make the critical investments in human resources to ensure a feasible and credible business case for innovation.

Ensure the minimum human resource capacities at the Innovation Fund Secretariat and well-resourced regional innovation networks. As well as identifying innovation champions in country offices (and providing them with adequate time, responsibility allocations and recognition).

Recommendation 4. Consolidate, redesign and reposition the Innovation Fund.

The Innovation Fund should evolve from the current internal 360-degrees experimental fund focusing on creativity and on nurturing a culture of innovation, to a selective, co-funding based, leverage-driven mechanism focusing on solutions aimed at solving the core problems UNFPA has decided to innovate for.

Recommendation 5. Shift the main focus to impact solutions while continuing work on nurturing a culture of innovation.

In order to accelerate demonstrating results, UNFPA should shift the main focus from culture to scalable impact solutions, that is, innovative solutions with a direct impact

on the lives of women and young people. This entails using innovation resources to solving current bottlenecks to expedite change in stagnant areas (e.g. teenage pregnancy, child marriage). UNFPA should continue working on developing a culture that nurtures innovation, but not as the main thrust of the innovation model or by using external resources. UNFPA can utilize existing internal resources to promote a culture of innovation.

Recommendation 6. Readjust the innovation model towards a more outward-looking approach based on partnerships.

UNFPA should re-calibrate the focus of its innovation approach, from the current inward-looking model to a more outward-looking approach based on partnerships with innovation ecosystem actors. In practice, this means incorporating environmental scanning, bringing the views of ecosystem actors into strategic and technical discussions; activating links; and cross-sharing knowledge and experiences with other UNIN agencies in areas of interest (such as M&E systems for innovation, accelerators, labs and innovation fund management). UNFPA should incorporate an innovation ecosystem perspective and seek partnerships and alliances with relevant players in the ecosystem e.g. universities, research institutes and foundations and private firms.

Recommendation 7. Anchor innovation in the Strategic Plan 2018-2021.

UNFPA should include innovation as a substantive element of the Strategic Plan 2018-2021. The Strategic Plan should include corporate indicators reflecting to extent to which UNFPA is adopting innovation approaches.

Recommendation 8. Activate a functional feedback exchange mechanism between the Innovation Initiative and relevant UNFPA business units.

This mechanism should generate an ongoing dialogue between the Innovation Initiative and business units in human resources, strategic planning, partnerships, South-South cooperation, resource mobilizations, knowledge management, procurement services, media and communication, and monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendation 9. Develop a learning-for-impact framework.

UNFPA should develop a simple frame that turns organizational learning into solutions that have an impact on the lives of women and young people. This frame should have at least three elements: innovation specific M&E systems, functioning knowledge sharing mechanisms and a scaling-up framework for successfully tested impact solutions.

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The analysis and recommendations of this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Population Fund. This is an independent publication by the independent Evaluation Office of UNFPA.

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