

Independent External Strategic Review of the Evaluation Function of UNFPA

FINAL REPORT

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Requested by: United Nations Population Fund, Evaluation Office

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The report can be accessed at: *(insert link)*

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Abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| ASRO | Arab States Regional Office |
| CE | Credentialed Evaluator |
| CO | UNFPA Country Office |
| CPE | Country Programme Evaluation |
| CSO | Civil Society Organisations |
| ECD | Evaluation Capacity Development |
| EECA | Eastern Europe and Central Asia |
| EO | Evaluation Office of UNFPA |
| EQAA | Evaluation Quality Assurance and Quality Assessment |
| EvalGender | Global partnership to promote Equity Focused and Gender Responsive Evaluations |
| EvalPartners | Global partnership for national evaluation capacity development |
| EvalYouth | Global partnership to promote inclusion of youth & young people in evaluation process |
| ETAP | External Technical Advisory Panel |
| GPS | Global Programming System |
| IAHE | Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation |
| ICPD | International Conference on Population and Development |
| LAC | Latin America and the Caribbean |
| M&E | Monitoring and Evaluation |
| MRTS | Management Response Tracking System |
| NECD | National Evaluation Capacity Development |
| QCPR | Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review |
| RO | UNFPA Regional Office |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SIS | Strategic Information System |
| UNCT | UN Country Teams |
| UNDAF | United Nations Development Assistance Framework |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNEG | United Nations Evaluation Group |
| UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |

Executive summary

The review was conducted to provide both an assessment of UNFPA's evaluation policy and assurance on the soundness of the evaluation function in UNFPA, as well as recommendations for improving them.

A. Evaluation policy

The review is of the opinion that UNFPA's evaluation policy is fundamentally sound, given the core objectives of organizational level policies, i.e. to explain what the policy is about, why the object of the policy is important to the organisation, the principles for its implementation, and the roles and responsibilities of different actors.

However, the review considers that the current UNFPA evaluation policy requires updating, for it to be consistent with evolutions and changes both within UNFPA and in the broader UN and global contexts. As well, the review considers that the evaluation policy is amenable to adjustments that would better reflect the priorities of UNFPA's 2018-2021 Strategy. Finally, an updated and revised evaluation policy should allow for, and support, change and innovation in UNFPA's evaluation practices.

B. Evaluation function

▪ Independence, governance and organisation

From its meetings and interviews with UNFPA evaluation staff, the review did not find evidence of, or suggestions to the effect that there are, threats to organisational independence.

In terms of behavioural independence, the review considers that the independence of evaluators in regions and countries is appropriately safeguarded, i.e. the autonomy of evaluative judgment is protected, taking into account the fact that M&E officers and focal points also fulfil management functions, i.e. monitoring. As well, quality assurance mechanisms contribute to safeguarding independence for regional and country evaluations.

With respect to the governance and organisation of UNFPA's evaluation function, the review is of the opinion that the structure and processes that are in place for accountability to the Executive Board and to support relationships within UNFPA, are functional. The review considers that improvements could be made to the quality of the EO's accountability reporting as well as to its relationships with UNFPA management, and regional and country M&E staff.

▪ Credibility, performance and value

The review considers that, to a large extent, corporate and decentralised evaluation processes are transparent and inclusive, two dimensions that are highlighted in UNEG norms and standards as being key to the credibility of evaluation.

As well, the review finds that UNFPA guidance recognizes that other important norms contribute to the credibility of evaluation, such as the ethical conduct of evaluation by evaluators that are impartial and that demonstrate appropriate professional and cultural competencies. While the review did not seek to assess consistency of evaluation practice in UNFPA with these norms, it did not come across, in its extensive round of interviews and meetings, indications to the contrary. Finally, the review found that UNFPA's quality assurance system for evaluation contributes to the credibility of its evaluations.

In terms of performance, the review finds that, within the parameters set by the evaluation policy and UNFPA's financial and administrative framework, the evaluation function has progressed relative to the objectives it has set for itself and done so with reasonable regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness. As well, the review finds that the evaluation function generally reports on its work in a manner consistent with UNEG norms and standards.

In the context of an independent and distinct evaluation function that has developed from start-up about 5 years ago, the performance of its current organisation and systems can be assessed as a reasonable and commendable achievement.

- **Utility and quality of evaluation**

The review considers that the UNFPA evaluation function is managed with due regard for utility. This said, the review highlights the importance for UNFPA of adapting continuously its evaluation processes to best support the attainment of UNFPA's mission in rapidly changing and challenging contexts.

In particular there should be a focus on strengthening communication effectiveness, including the effectiveness of written reports relative to their intended readerships.

The review acknowledges that the Evaluation Quality Assurance and Assessment system is functional and that it provides a measure of quality control at the planning stage and at the drafting stage of the evaluation process. It also finds that the ex-post quality assessment of completed evaluation reports allows for an assessment of progress over time of their quality, based on the report assessment criteria. Here as well, areas for improvement have been identified especially for some of the criteria and their specifications, against which reports are assessed.

C. Recommendations

- **Policy**

The review recommends that the evaluation policy be updated for consistency with evolutions and changes both within UNFPA and in the broader UN and global contexts. It also recommends that the evaluation policy be adjusted to better reflect the priorities of UNFPA's 2018-2021 Strategy. Finally, the updated and adjusted evaluation policy should support and promote, change and innovation in UNFPA's evaluation practices.

- **Communication**

The review recommends that presentations of evaluations results to the Executive Board be mindful of its governance function and its requirements. This means, among other considerations, not delving into technical and methodological information beyond what is necessary to provide the Board with information relevant to its strategic, policy and programming interests. Of course, the Board can in any event require whatever information it seeks and this recommendation should not be construed to limit its ability to do so. Rather, it is intended to strengthen the effectiveness of the evaluation function's communication with the Board.

- **Reframing evaluation**

The review recommends that the EO guides the evaluation function in UNFPA towards a better balance between its accountability, decision support and learning pursuits, but as well, that it considers how evaluation can contribute directly to mission-relevant outcomes for rights holders.

Achieving a more appropriate balance, including direct evaluation impact on rights holders, requires from the EO a conceptualisation of evaluation that, while including it, goes beyond the assessment of results, to encompass that of valuing.

As such, the EO should reframe progressively how the evaluation function understands its performance. Ultimately the effectiveness of the evaluation function should be viewed through the lens of the value it adds relative to the resources allocated to it, rather than solely on the quantity and quality of its production.

▪ **Evaluation quality**

The support provided by the EO should better integrate relevant developments in the theory and practice of evaluation, and the conception of evaluation quality should be based on a more comprehensive and value-based understanding of quality. This could mean for example, recognising and using fully the evaluation process as a driver of value, treating context more fulsomely as part of evaluation approach and methodology, including political economy, improving communication effectiveness, piloting innovative evaluations, etc. A key consideration for the EO should be a revision of its guidance to include diversification of evaluation approaches and methodologies, with a view to keeping it practical and accessible.

▪ **Decentralised evaluation**

The EO, in its role as custodian of the evaluation function in UNFPA, together with relevant stakeholders, should address progressively the nature and organisation of its evaluation function in countries, with a view to clarify and adapt the frame of reference for the organisation of the evaluation function and its activities, regionally and in countries.

▪ **Evaluation reports**

Based on its assessment of a selection of recent corporate evaluation reports, the review recommends that the EO address systematically observations developed regarding: the methodology, findings and analysis, conclusions and the communication of evaluation.

The review suggests:

- that these observations may also provide opportunities for improvement to reports from decentralised evaluations.
- that evaluations conducted at decentralised levels apply the same type of process for developing the recommendations than the one used at corporate level, which is to organise workshops gathering the external evaluation team, the evaluation managers and management to construct appropriate and practical recommendations.

▪ **Quality assurance and assessment**

The review sees opportunities for improvement to the EQAA system and to its organisation and recommends that the EO consider:

- the opportunity of taking into account the differences between CPEs and broad thematic and institutional evaluations in the EQAA system and processes.
- a more decentralised form of organisation for quality control of terms of reference and of evaluation consultants, for example to regional monitoring and evaluation functions.

- improving the criteria for the report Quality Assessment process, especially for those regarding the structure and quality of reporting as well as the design and methodology.

The review recommends that, as part of its continuous improvement, the EO update progressively its EQAA system to address the preceding observations.

Introduction

The independent External Strategic Review of UNFPA's evaluation function was carried out following the engagement taken in the evaluation policy¹ for its review at regular intervals and revision as required, and the Executive Board's request that a review of the policy also include its implementation².

The review considered UNFPA's evaluation function, from the perspectives of its policy and of its implementation at both central and decentralised levels of the organisation. This report presents in concise fashion the main results of the review as well as suggestions for improvement of the evaluation function where warranted.

The report will be presented to, and discussed with, the Executive Board during informal sessions in May 2018. The review report is intended primarily for the Executive Board of UNFPA and for the Executive Committee of UNFPA. It will also be disseminated within UNFPA and made publicly available.

The report is structured as follows:

Chapters 1 to 4 present the purpose and context of the external strategic review of UNFPA's evaluation function, the main features of UNFPA's evaluation function as well as the approach used for this review.

Chapter 5 provides some overall observations stemming from the review.

Chapter 6 provides conclusions and findings on the evaluation policy.

Chapters 7 to 9 provide conclusions and findings on the evaluation function, focussing on its independence, governance and organisation in Chapter 7, its credibility, performance and value in Chapter 8 and its utility and quality in Chapter 9.

Chapter 10 formulates recommendations, identifying main considerations for adjusting the evaluation policy as well as for improving the evaluation function.

¹ DP/FPA/2013/5

² DP/2013/38, Decision 2013/21

1. Purpose

The purpose of the independent External Strategic Review is to update and improve UNFPA's evaluation policy, to provide assurance on the extent to which UNFPA's evaluation practice is consistent with UNEG norms & standards, and to provide, where possible, recommendations for the improvement of evaluation in UNFPA.

More specifically, the review set out to:

- a) Assess whether the Evaluation Policy should be revised or not, and, if so, identify areas of the policy that should be changed.
- b) Provide an independent assessment of the evaluation function in UNFPA, based on expert judgment and taking into account UNEG Norms and Standards of independence, credibility and utility.
- c) Provide points for attention, suggestions or recommendations, for consolidating successful practices and for strengthening evaluation processes and products where warranted.

2. Context

In 2013, as part of the repositioning of the evaluation function in UNFPA, a Revised Evaluation Policy³ was approved by the Executive Board and an independent evaluation office, with accountability to the Executive Board, was created. The Revised Evaluation Policy requires that UNFPA review its evaluation policy at regular intervals and revise it as needed, so that it is appropriate to organisational requirements, and to UNFPA's evolving strategy and approaches.

In the five years since UNFPA's 2013 Evaluation Policy was approved, significant changes have taken place within the organisation, in the UN system and in the broader external environment, and further changes relevant to evaluation are anticipated over the period leading to 2030.

▪ Key contextual factors internal to UNFPA

These evolutions include, as major trends and inter alia, a changing funding context marked by a reduction in core resources and an increase in UNFPA interventions in humanitarian contexts.

In terms of strategy and plans, key organisational documents have also evolved. UNFPA's strategic plan for 2018-2021 was released in October 2017, reaffirming UNFPA's goal to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health, to realize reproductive rights, and to reduce maternal mortality to accelerate progress on the agenda of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and on the 2030 Agenda⁴. More specifically with respect to the evaluation function, the current Director of the Evaluation Office took up his position in August 2017.

³ DP/FPA/2013/5

⁴ A/RES/70/1

▪ Elements of external context in the UN system and in the broader environment

Since the approval of the current UNFPA policy, the frame of reference for implementing interventions has changed with, among others, the adoption of essential political documents and mechanisms such as, in 2015, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. It includes the SDG, sets out a “country-led” view of development while addressing inequality (“no one left behind”) and highlights gender-based violence as a key issue. As well, in 2016, the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR)⁵, emphasises UN coherence carrying forward notions such as “delivering as one”. Finally, the UN Secretary General is leading discussions on UN reform⁶.

More broadly, among other challenges, international development is facing the multiplication of global humanitarian emergencies, and development agencies are having to address urgent demands in swiftly changing operating contexts. In view of UNFPA’s mandate to address demographic issues, attention to the global refugee crisis and to the effects of climate change is also of growing importance.

These evolutions have implications for planning, conducting and using evaluation. To respond to these challenges and evolving contexts, the Evaluation Office has undertaken a process to develop a Strategy for Evaluation in UNFPA⁷ to better position and implement evaluation. The development of this strategy has been undertaken in conjunction with this review⁸.

3. Evaluation in UNFPA

The Revised Evaluation Policy states that the objectives of evaluation in UNFPA are to: (i) demonstrate accountability to stakeholders on performance in achieving development results, and on invested resources, (ii) support evidence-based decision making by management with credible information to guide planning, budgeting, implementation and reporting, as well as improvements in policies and programmes, (iii) contribute lessons learned to the knowledge base for implementation of the Programme of Action of the ICPD and of the 2030 Agenda.

As described in the Revised Evaluation Policy, evaluation activities unfold at two distinct levels in UNFPA: corporate and decentralised. Evaluation activities are considered distinct from, but complementary to, the performance management function and to other types of knowledge production.

3.1 Evaluation at corporate level

UNFPA’s corporate evaluation function is led by the Evaluation Office (EO), which manages and/or conducts the following types of activities:

⁵ A/RES/71/243

⁶ “Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity and peace on a healthy planet”.

⁷ UNFPA Strategy for Evaluation 2018-2021

⁸ Note for transparency: The external reviewer provided input into the initiation of the development of UNFPA Evaluation Strategy however did not review the Strategy as at the time of this review, the Strategy was still under development.

- **Corporate evaluations**

Corporate evaluations are undertaken by the EO to assess UNFPA activities in light of expectations for development effectiveness and organizational performance. Corporate evaluations, including evaluations of joint-programmes, are planned on a quadrennial basis and topics are chosen in consultation with the Executive Board, and UNFPA management. Nineteen corporate evaluations are planned in the 2018-2021 Quadrennial Evaluation Plan.

- **Evaluation quality assurance and quality assessment**

In 2016, the EO reviewed the evaluation quality and assurance system, and developed in 2017 a renewed Evaluation Quality Assurance and Quality Assessment (EQAA) system composed of two mechanisms to support the quality of UNFPA's evaluations both at corporate and decentralised levels: (i) Quality Assurance, takes place during the evaluation process on the Terms of Reference, Draft Inception Report and Draft Final Report, and (ii) Quality Assessment which assesses, against pre-determined criteria, the evaluation report after it has been finalised⁹.

- **Evaluation Capacity Development in UNFPA**

The EO conducts and coordinates training initiatives, promotes exchange of knowledge, develops guidance and tools, promotes increased use of evaluation and works to foster a greater understanding of, and support to, evaluation in UNFPA. To strengthen initiatives in this area, the EO conducted in 2016 a survey on UNFPA monitoring and evaluation capacity.

- **UN Coherence at global level**

The quadrennial evaluation plan includes a number of priorities for joint and system wide evaluations. The EO, participates actively in joint exercises; e.g. in 2016, the EO took part in i) a joint evaluation together with the Evaluation Division at Global Affairs Canada and UNICEF, ii) an evaluability assessment of a joint programme with UNICEF. It also continued to take part in the work of the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) Steering Group and participated in two independent system-wide evaluations, led by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU). Still in 2016, the EO joined forces with UN Women, UNDP, UNICEF, UNEG and EvalPartners¹⁰ to organize high-level and technical events in New York¹¹. In 2017, EO co-managed joint evaluations of joint programmes to end child marriage and FGM, and actively participated in the 2017 UNEG evaluation week (March 2017) helping to strengthen UNFPA partnership with other UNEG members.

- **Global multi-stakeholder partnerships for NECD**

The EO has been working to strengthen its engagement in global communities of practice in evaluation: in 2016, the EO attended several evaluation conferences and participated in a number of reference and expert advisory groups, primarily for evaluations in the area of gender, sexual and

⁹ <https://web2.unfpa.org/public/about/oversight/evaluations/templates.unfpa>

¹⁰ EvalPartners EvalPartners is a partnership providing a platform to share knowledge on country-led M&E systems worldwide. In addition to being a learning source, EvalPartners facilitates the strengthening of a global community, while identifying good practices and lessons learned about monitoring and evaluation in general, and country-led M&E systems in particular. EvalPartners is managed by UNICEF and IOCE and supported by several partners (including DevInfo, IDEAS, UN Women, UNEG, UNDP, ILO, IDRC, Rockefeller Foundation, BetterEvaluation, ReLAC, etc.).

¹¹ "No one left behind: evaluating the SDGs with an equity-focused and gender-responsive lens".

reproductive health, adolescent and girls and use of data. The EO is also a member of EvalPartners and EvalGender+¹², and provides support to EvalYouth¹³ both at global and regional level since 2017. Following the event “No one left behind: evaluating the SDGs with an equity-focused and gender-responsive lens”, UNFPA developed and published guidance on these issues, with the same partners (UN Women, UNDP, UNICEF, UNEG and EvalPartners).

3.2 Evaluation at decentralised level

UNFPA’s decentralised evaluation is implemented both at regional level by regional offices (ROs) and in countries by country offices (COs). The decentralised evaluation function manages and/or conducts the following types of activities:

- **Programme evaluations**

There are two types of programme evaluations: country programme evaluations and regional programme evaluations. These types of evaluations are managed by the respective country and regional offices; independent external evaluators, pre-qualified by the Evaluation Office, conduct programme evaluations according to terms of reference approved by the EO. Programme evaluations are included in the quadrennial budgeted evaluation plan prepared by the EO.

The evaluation policy states that country programme evaluations should be conducted “*at least once in every two programme cycles*”.

- **Evaluation quality assurance and quality assessment**

Part of the EQAA system is implemented by the Regional M&E advisors for decentralised evaluations. They assess the draft ToR, Draft Inception Report and the Draft Final Report. Final draft ToR and the consultants selected at decentralised levels are vetted by the EO.

- **Evaluation Capacity Development**

In collaboration with the EO, evaluation capacity development activities are conducted at the decentralised level essentially through workshops and seminars, as well as technical assistance.

- **UN Coherence at decentralised level**

UNFPA is a member of Regional UN Evaluation Groups in the regions where they exist (Asia, Latin America and East and Southern Africa). The Arab States Regional Office (ASRO) is also working to strengthen its partnerships. At country level, UNFPA is part of the UNCT M&E groups, and supports UNDAF evaluations; in 2016, 75% of COs reported being engaged in a partnership of some sort with other UN agencies, the majority of which were related to UNDAF.

- **Decentralised multi-stakeholder partnership for NECD**

Most COs have relationships with national partners (government ministries, statistical agencies, universities, CSOs, etc.) and other donors for the purpose of NECD, while ROs are involved with

¹² EvalGender+ is a network, within the EvalPartners initiative, catering for equity focused and gender-responsive dimensions to evaluation.

¹³ EvalYouth is a network, within the EvalPartners initiative, catering for young and emerging evaluators.

NECD activities to a lesser extent than COs. The new strategy calls for stronger engagement in this area. It should be noted that the EO will report on this subject in its 2017 Annual report.

3.3 Evaluation function and management

The evaluation function in UNFPA is considered distinct from, but complementary to, the performance management function¹⁴ which manages the corporate-level performance reporting systems (MRTS, GPS, SIS). The corporate evaluation reports presented by the EO and the corporate-level performance reports are intended to be complementary. The former presents independent views on corporate performance based on assessments made on selected subjects, under the supervision of the EO, while the latter generates corporate-level information on performance and results based on data received from ROs and COs, under the supervision of UNFPA's Programme Division.

As such, knowledge produced by evaluation is also distinct in nature from, but complementary to, other knowledge produced and used by management such as research and statistical information, all of which contribute to UNFPA's knowledge and its knowledge management strategy¹⁵.

3.4 Trends

The EO reports the following trends over the period from 2013 to 2017¹⁶:

▪ Evaluation expenditure

Evaluation expenditure has been steadily increasing, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of programme budget. In 2016, the estimated overall budget for the UNFPA evaluation function was USD 6,3 million, which represents about 0.91% of total UNFPA programme expenditure in 2016. This represents a significant increase in evaluation expenditure from 2014, when the budget allocated was USD 3,69 million, or 0.45% of UNFPA expenditure. Despite these improvements, current evaluation expenditure remains below the budget norm suggested by the 2013 Evaluation Policy, which calls for up to 3% of the total programme budget to be dedicated to the evaluation function.

▪ Human resources

Percentage of professional monitoring and evaluation staff to overall staff, has also increased, reaching 3% in 2016. Half of UNFPA country offices are staffed with a dedicated monitoring and evaluation officer, although this varies by region: the number of M&E officers is significantly lower in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) and in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). In 2016, the central Evaluation Office currently had eight approved posts: one at general service level, six at professional level, and one director.

▪ Number of evaluations

Over the period 2013 – 2017 the Evaluation Office completed 15 evaluation studies at the corporate level¹⁷ and about 50 country programme evaluations (CPE) were completed at decentralized level.

¹⁴ DP/FPA/2017/9, UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021

¹⁵ DP/FPA/2017/CRP.3

¹⁶ DP/FPA/2017/5

¹⁷ The EO published: three independent country programme evaluations; two joint programme level evaluations (as the leading agency); two joint evaluations/ evaluability study (as member of the evaluation management group); an independent system wide evaluation (as member of the evaluation management group); three thematic evaluations; two institutional evaluations; a meta-analysis study and two synthesis studies.

While the number of evaluations and studies produced by the EO has been increasing, the EO reports that country and regional offices have completed fewer programme-level evaluations; a number of them, although planned, were cancelled due to budgetary constraints.

- **Evaluation report quality**

According to the EQAA system, the quality of evaluation reports quality has improved markedly in recent years. 90% of evaluation reports produced in 2017 were considered good or excellent, compared to 77% in 2015 and to 50% in 2014.

4. Approach

The review was conducted to provide both an assessment of UNFPA's evaluation policy and assurance on the soundness of the evaluation function in UNFPA as well as recommendations for improving them.

The review was conducted taking into account UNEG Norms and Standards on independence, credibility, utility.

4.1 Principles

- **Independence**

To safeguard the independence of the review, a Steering Committee was constituted to provide independent oversight. The Steering Committee, chaired by the UNEG co-chair of the Task force on Review of evaluation functions, and composed of a representative from the Evaluation Office of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the UNFPA Office of the Executive Director as ex-officio member, retained the services of an external professional Credentialed Evaluator, Ian C. Davies, (CE) with prior experience of UNEG Peer Reviews, to conduct this review.

An external technical advisory panel (ETAP) was also established to provide diverse geographical and institutional perspectives to the review. The ETAP was chaired by the former UNEG vice chair and Director of UNICEF Evaluation Office, and composed of the Deputy Executive Director, National Council for evaluation of Public Policies, Coneval, Mexico; the Director General, IEG and Vice-President, World Bank; the EvalYouth co-chair; the Governing Board Secretary, Asia Pacific Evaluation Association; and, the President, African Evaluation Association¹⁸.

¹⁸ List of Steering Committee and ETAP members in Annex 1.

- **Consultative process**

The review was carried out over the period from November 2017 to March 2018, using a consultative and participative process. The consultation, based on over 30 interviews with UNFPA management and professional staff at headquarters and in the field, as well as with external respondents, generated information on significant dimensions of UNFPA's evaluation function and on the appropriateness of its policy. The review also examined documentation both on the organisation overall and on its evaluation function; compared UNFPA evaluation policy with other policies in the UN system and reviewed a selection of evaluation reports.

4.2 Review

- **Review**

The approach is a focussed pilot version of traditional UNEG Peer Reviews, intended to be completed in a shorter timeframe and at less cost, and combining features of organisational assessment, i.e. principles of well-functioning organisations, and of normative assessment, i.e. consistency with criteria such as norms and standards.

Although consistent with UNEG Norms and Standards on independence, credibility, utility as well as the general principles that underlie UNEG Peer Reviews, the assessment and assurance provided by this review are based on a standard of «knowledge», i.e. the reviewer's expertise in organisational governance, management, accountability and evaluation, beyond a narrower and more restrictive standard of «evidence», i.e. such as what would be expected in an accountability focussed evaluation or a performance audit.

In this perspective, UNEG normative references have been taken as minimum propositions, i.e. it is not because they are met that the function is performing well or optimally, the approach to the review allowing for a more comprehensive appreciation of UNFPA's evaluation function.

- **Recommendations**

Recommendations are points for attention that highlight areas where the review considers that improvements can be made to process and products of the evaluation function in UNFPA. They are not prescriptions for specific actions as these are the purview and responsibility of relevant staff and are best developed by, or in conjunction with, their implementers.

- **Limitations**

The review of the decentralised evaluation function draws to a significant extent on exchanges with six country offices in which country representatives and their respective M&E officers, M&E specialist or M&E Focal Points were interviewed, as well as the six Regional M&E Advisors and Regional Directors. The selection was recommended by the EO to reflect a mix of "big country offices" and "small country offices" in different regions. While the findings drawn at country level give useful insights into country level perspectives on evaluation and, in many respects, are consistent with findings at regional level, they should not be construed to constitute a "representative sample" in the statistical sense of the term.

5. Overall observations

Although the main focuses of the review¹⁹ were on UNFPA's evaluation policy and on the consistency of UNFPA's evaluation function with UNEG norms and standards, two overarching findings stand out.

There is a consensus in UNFPA that:

- ❖ The independent evaluation function is critical to the sound functioning of the organisation and key to the successful realisation of UNFPA's mission.
- ❖ Evaluation is indispensable for sound management and policy decision-making, for independent accountability reporting and to generate evidence-informed knowledge.

These findings reflect, in UNFPA, a broad-based understanding of, and agreement on, the role and value not only of evaluation, but as well of the necessary independence of the evaluation function. This consensus constitutes a strong foundation for evaluation in UNFPA, one that is not always present in comparable multilateral development organisations and, as such, should be consolidated, cared for and built on. This is a shared responsibility across the organisation, at governance and management levels, and in countries, regions and head office.

It places a special responsibility on the management and staff of the evaluation function, and particularly on the EO, to be attentive to the varied and changing needs and expectations of key stakeholders in UNFPA, in the UN system and in partner countries. This means that, among other things, as UNFPA and its partners seek to innovate and increase their effectiveness so that “every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled”, so must evaluation innovate and increase the value of its contribution to this goal.

In particular, EO professional staff with responsibilities for providing guidance and for exercising quality assurance, should be attentive to the currency of their knowledge, skills and abilities, relative to the evolving requirements of modern professional evaluation practice, to the requirements of UNFPA, especially in terms of innovation, and to the needs of its rights holders.

¹⁹ Two main questions were put to the external strategic review:

- To what extent is UNFPA's current evaluation policy appropriate to provide clear and useful guidance to UNFPA (Evaluation Office, Executive Director, Executive Committee and to other relevant business units), to the Executive Board and other stakeholders, to contribute to the successful realisation of UNFPA's strategic plan, and to support fully UNFPA's effective contribution to evaluation in the UN systems and in its partner countries?
- To what extent does UNFPA's evaluation function meet UNEG norms and standards of independence, credibility and utility?

6. Evaluation policy

Conclusion: The review is of the opinion that UNFPA's evaluation policy is fundamentally sound, given the core objectives of organizational level policies, i.e. to explain what the policy is about, why the object of the policy is important to the organisation, the principles for its implementation, and the roles and responsibilities of different actors.

However, the review considers that the current UNFPA evaluation policy requires updating, for it to be consistent with evolutions and changes both within UNFPA and in the broader UN and global contexts. As well, the review considers that the evaluation policy is amenable to adjustments that would better reflect the priorities of UNFPA's 2018-2021 Strategy. Finally, a revised evaluation policy should allow for, and support, change and innovation in UNFPA's evaluation practices²⁰.

The review found that UNFPA's current Evaluation Policy addresses core aspects of the evaluation function, is comparable in this respect to, and consistent with, other evaluation policies in the UN system and, more generally, in multilateral development organisations²¹. Indeed, the current policy document contains the common features of evaluation policies such as background elements, purpose and definition of the evaluation function, references to guiding principles and norms, as well as considerations on types of evaluations, on evaluation use, on quality assurance, on evaluation resources as well as on roles and responsibilities relative to the evaluation function.

The review found that most its interviewees considered the evaluation policy adequate although requiring updates and, to varying degrees, improvements. A few interviewees in regions and countries expressed the view that, at their level, the evaluation policy and any changes that may be made to it, had little effect on their work. Others were of the opinion that the evaluation policy should be overhauled, especially to update the treatment of context, framing documents and terminology; to clarify key aspects of implementation and use of evaluation; and, to include emerging organisational challenges and their implications for the evaluation function.

▪ **Current context, framing documents and terminology**

The review found, in the evaluation policy document and from observations from interviewees, that parts of the policy are not up-to date such as references to the Millennium Development Goals, UNFPA Strategic Plan 2008-2013, biennial evaluation planning, etc.²²

▪ **Organisational challenges**

The review diagnosed that the evaluation policy could be strengthened by dealing more clearly and specifically with organisational challenges such as having to work increasingly in humanitarian contexts, participation in UN system-wide initiatives, as well as innovation and knowledge management in UNFPA. As well, views were expressed that the policy could make clearer roles and responsibilities for evaluation, particularly for decentralised evaluations and for their use in informing country programming.

²⁰ A list of suggestions and considerations for updates and changes to the current UNFPA evaluation policy can be found in annex to this report.

²¹ The review examined the evaluation policies of: UNWomen(2012), UNESCO(2015), UNICEF(2013), UNDP (2016), WFP(2015), ITC(2015), IFAD (2015).

²² More details are provided in annex 1.

Concerns were raised by interviewees about what they consider to be the insufficiency of resources for decentralised evaluation, especially in countries, relative to the funding that is available for corporate evaluations under the aegis of the EO. It should be noted however that, although the evaluation policy refers to a norm of up to 3% of the total programme budget for the evaluation function, and although this norm has not yet been met, resources for decentralised evaluation are not earmarked. As such, there exist situations in countries where evaluation is implemented in a manner that meets minimal requirements, and in some cases not at all.

The question of resources for decentralised evaluation affects coverage. As it stands, the evaluation policy requires that the “*CPE will be conducted at least once in every two programme cycles*”, the target being to cover 100% of CPEs over this timeframe. However, data from the EO show that about 80% of CPE have been evaluated during the last two programmes cycles.

The review found expressed in the field expressed a need for more focussed, brief, forward-looking and knowledge-generating evaluation, than a necessary regimen of formal accountability-driven CPE geared to program cycles. Despite guidance provided on the timing of CPEs, their timeliness is considered an issue, e.g. “*by the time the CPE is completed we are already well into the next cycle*”. Interviewees express a desire for a more flexible and context-adapted range of evaluative approaches, that are responsive not only to board and management information requirements, but more importantly to those of rights holders and of countries.

One of the challenges identified from a field perspective is the perceived requirement that decentralised evaluations use “rigorous methodology” which may meet norms and standards but is not necessarily useful for dealing with the pressing issues faced by the country office and the country. According to interviewees, the ability to decide on what to evaluate, why and how, as well as to consider other forms of assessment, should be addressed in an updated evaluation policy: “*the idea is not for evaluation to cover everything but to cover the right things*” and “*we need to be strategic in the use of our scarce resources*”.

▪ **Observations for implementation and use of the policy**

The review finds that the current policy tends to be normative regarding the evaluation process, a characterisation which may put it at odds with the direction of the new 2018-2021 Evaluation Strategy, which is toward more diversification and flexibility in implementing evaluations.

As well, the review finds that the way the evaluation function is intended to report on what has been done i.e. on «*(a) compliance; (b) coverage; (c) quality; (d) findings; and (e) recommendations*», should be revisited to better reflect the direction in which the evaluation function is evolving, in particular the diversification of evaluation approaches and the contribution of evaluation to UNFPA’s mission.

7. Independence, governance and organisation

Conclusion: From its meetings and interviews with UNFPA evaluation staff, the review did not find evidence of, or suggestions to the effect that there are, threats to organisational independence.

In terms of behavioural independence, the review considers that the independence of evaluators in regions and countries is appropriately safeguarded, i.e. the autonomy of evaluative judgment is protected, taking into account the fact that M&E officers and focal points fulfil management functions. As well, EO quality assurance contributes to safeguarding independence for regional and country evaluations.

With respect to the governance and organisation of UNFPA's evaluation function, the review is of the opinion that the structure and processes that are in place for accountability to the Executive Board and to support relationships within UNFPA, are functional. However, the review considers that improvements could be made to the quality of the EO's accountability reporting and of its relationships with UNFPA management as well as with regional and country M&E staff.

7.1 Organisational independence

▪ Corporate

The central evaluation function, i.e. the EO, is positioned independently from management functions and is responsible for setting the evaluation plan. The Director of the EO is accountable to the Executive Board of UNFPA and, for administrative matters, reports to the Executive Director of UNFPA. The review found that, among members of the Executive Board and of UNFPA senior management that it interviewed, the evaluation function's independence is acknowledged and valued.

UNEG norms and standards state that, as a component of independence, the central evaluation function be provided with adequate resources to conduct its work. The UN General Assembly resolution 67/226 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities emphasizes the importance of independent, credible and useful evaluation functions with sufficient resources. The current UNFPA evaluation policy builds on this resolution to commit resources accordingly, in support of its evaluation function.

The review notes that there is a systematic process in place in UNFPA to prepare, submit and have approved by the Executive Board a quadrennial budgeted evaluation plan, the most recent covering the period 2018-2021. While, overall, funding for evaluation in UNFPA remains below 3% of program expenditure, the review did not seek to assess the adequacy of overall allocation, noting the difficult and variable funding environment it is currently evolving in.

▪ Decentralised

The decentralised evaluation function is effected regionally through regional monitoring and evaluation officers in each of UNFPA's six regions, and in country offices, through either monitoring and evaluation officers, whose positions are dedicated, or monitoring and evaluation focal points, who take on these responsibilities as required and as part of their overall responsibilities. In several cases, UNFPA monitoring and evaluation staff report to their Director, regional or in country.

The review found that management and M&E staff that it met with and interviewed, in regional and in country offices, understood and supported the independence of evaluation. The review did not find an instance, nor was given any indication, to the contrary.

The review notes that the costs of country and regional programme-level evaluations are borne by the respective programmes and, as such, these evaluations are dependent on budget allocation decisions that are the purview of management.

Notwithstanding that accountability to the Executive Board includes discussions on the quadrennial budgeted evaluation plan and their budgetary implications, this funding-related aspect of independence is weaker at regional and country programme-level than at central level.

7.2 Behavioural independence

▪ Corporate

The review was not provided with indication of undue influence on the process of conducting corporate evaluation. Throughout its interviews and meetings, the review was provided with a consistent view from Management recognising the critical importance of evaluation independence to the credibility and to the utility of knowledge for the organization, to inform programming and for organizational learning.

▪ Decentralised

Given that, in regions and countries, the structure of UNFPA offices and of their functions make it impractical to implement organisational separations between evaluation and management, the review sought information about the extent to which regional and country offices constitute enabling environments for the behavioural independence of the evaluator.

The review found that directors of ROs and COs value evaluation and do not interfere in the commissioning and conduct of evaluations. M&E officers and focal points are given latitude to manage evaluations as well as to consult with colleagues and with the EO as required. Reference Groups are used for evaluations, bringing together key country and regional stakeholders, as the case may be, as well as national partners. The review found no indication of undue influence being exerted on evaluations, from its interviews with regional and country M&E officers.

7.3 Governance and organisation

The review focussed on the relationships between decentralised M&E functions and the EO; between EO and Directors centrally; and between the EO, as custodian of the evaluation function, and the Executive Board.

▪ Decentralised M&E functions and the EO

UNFPA's evaluation function, although implemented directly by the EO centrally, and by M&E officers and focal points regionally and in countries, is inter-related to UNFPA's broader management and governance system. As such, the quality of functional relationships between main actors in the system is a determinant of performance of both individual components, such as the evaluation function, and of the overall system.

The review found that, regionally and in countries, management and staff see evaluation mostly as a process that is centrally driven by the EO, "*there is the handbook, it is all controlled by the EO*". While

there is recognition of the benefits that evaluations may bring in providing independent accountability reporting to the Executive Board and information for program management, there is a shared view that evaluation could provide more value in being more attentive to local needs.

The review notes that, at the start of the process, the EO vets the terms of reference as well as the external evaluation consultants. Then all evaluation reports are assessed by UNFPA's Evaluation Quality Assurance and Assessment System (EQAA).

- **EO and Directors centrally**

Centrally, i.e. at UNFPA Head Office, management is supportive and appreciative of the EO's conduct of recent formative evaluations which, in its view, are constructive and useful to management, and to its representation to the Executive Board. It also welcomes the EO's initiative to align strategically its evaluations with corporate goals and strategies, for example by considering suggestions on evaluating organisational preparedness for humanitarian interventions.

- **EO and the Executive Board**

With respect to the evaluation function's relationship with the Executive Board, through the EO, Board members that were interviewed provided a positive appreciation overall of UNFPA's independent evaluation function. They highlighted the importance of the impartiality of evaluation reports, as well as their necessary and valuable contribution to the accountability landscape, and to deliberations on programming.

However, the parameters are not necessarily clear for what evaluation information needs to be brought to the Executive Board and for what reason, especially for thematic evaluations, "*a technical evaluation on how things are actually happening on the ground in countries, you don't bring it to the board for deliberation and consensus*". There is agreement that, as a general rule, there is little value and interest in discussing evaluation methodology at the level of the Executive Board.

Executive Board members suggested improvements in communication, e.g. presentations of results and recommendations, without going into a lengthy description of methodology; making clear how an evaluation contributes to the effectiveness of UNFPA; doing evaluation that provides strategic level and forward-looking knowledge and considerations; using a range of evaluation products to address different purposes. Some members were of the view that in country dissemination of evaluation reports should be improved.

8. Credibility, performance and value

Conclusion: The review considers that, to a large extent, corporate and decentralised evaluation processes are transparent and inclusive, two dimensions that are highlighted in UNEG norms and standards as being key to the credibility of evaluation.

As well, the review finds that UNFPA guidance recognizes that other important norms contribute to the credibility of evaluation such as the ethical conduct of evaluation by evaluators that are impartial and that demonstrate appropriate professional and cultural competencies. While the review did not seek to assess consistency of evaluation practice in UNFPA with these norms, it did not come across, in its extensive round of interviews and meetings, indications to the contrary. Finally, the review found that UNFPA's quality assurance system for evaluation contributes to the credibility of its evaluations.

In terms of performance, the review finds that, within the parameters set by the evaluation policy and UNFPA's financial and administrative framework, the evaluation function has progressed relative to the objectives it has set for itself and done so with reasonable regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness. As well, the review finds that the evaluation function generally reports on its work in a manner consistent with UNEG norms and standards.

In the context of an independent and distinct evaluation function that has developed from start-up about five years ago, the performance of its current organisation and systems can be assessed as a reasonable and commendable achievement.

8.1 Credibility

▪ Corporate level

Executive Board members and UNFPA staff that were interviewed by the review find UNFPA evaluations credible generally. Observations on evaluation approaches and methodology are positive mostly, however there is a view among UNFPA management and staff that evaluations are conducted in much the same fashion most of the time, giving the impression of a cookie-cutter approach to them. For UNFPA management, evaluation recommendations are variable in their relevance and applicability to management and, as such, are not always credible. The review was provided with an oft-expressed view that corporate evaluation recommendations are not necessarily consistent with the realities and contexts in which UNFPA operates and that management has to contend with. This tends to be the case more with summative than with, more recent, formative evaluations. A more collaborative process for evaluation recommendations is appreciated by management.

The review notes that the quality assessment template provides for a consistent way to appreciate the quality of evaluation reports based on UNFPA quality principles and for seeing trends in report quality.

▪ Decentralised level

At country level, there is a view that the requirements associated with conducting program evaluation can be demanding in terms of time and compliance with EO requirements, i.e. "cumbersome", relative to the resources available, both human and financial. A desire is expressed for more flexibility and diversity in evaluation approaches. As well, the availability of qualified consultants can present challenges to the selection of evaluators, including the ability to pay competitive rates.

8.2 Performance and value

▪ Overall

The UNFPA evaluation function is now at a stage of development sufficient to exploit opportunities that are perceived by stakeholders as critical to its effectiveness in contributing to UNFPA's mission; the opportunities identified by the review are the following:

- the way in which evaluation is conceived in UNFPA;
- how evaluation is organised and carried out centrally by the EO;
- how evaluation is organised and carried out in regions and countries.

Indeed, until recently, as shown e.g. by the content of evaluation reports, the primary focus of evaluation in UNFPA has been on accountability, and the predominant basis for evaluating has been the achievement of results, i.e. using simple causal models to get at the “what works” question. However, the review notes that the EO has begun to conduct formative evaluations and to produce information on lessons learned; these are important and positive initiatives, putting the evaluation function on the path to better support policy and management decision-making.

▪ Corporate level

The review found that the timeliness of evaluation at corporate level has improved due in part to more recent formative evaluations²³, i.e. the *Formative evaluation of the UNFPA innovation initiative*, and the *Evaluation of the architecture supporting the operationalisation of the UNFPA 2014-2017 Strategic Plan*.

Management at decentralised levels also point out that their work often involves interactions with political actors in countries, on sensitive topics, including advocacy for interventions that require political groundwork over long periods of time. While this important work may not produce observable results in the short to medium terms, it is in many cases a trust-building process and a pre-requisite for successful interventions. The view is that evaluation as it is currently undertaken does not sufficiently capture and value these aspects, nor does it necessarily help in this work.

The review notes that the evaluation function understands its performance according to the criteria stated in the 2013 Policy, on which its reporting is made «*The UNFPA evaluation function is assessed against six key dimensions of performance: (a) planning and management; (b) quality; (c) dissemination of results; (d) use and follow-up; (e) human resources; and (f) financial resources.*»

The evaluation function reports on its performance in a manner that is based primarily on information that is countable, i.e. quantitative data, such as number of evaluations planned vs. implemented, and implementation status both for corporate and decentralised levels, justifying where deviations occurred. Reporting on quality is mostly based on numbers about what went into, and came out of, the EQAA system. Although, numbers help to tell part of the story they are insufficient to communicate the full value of what the evaluation function contributes. Seen in this light, the evaluation function appears to be short-changing itself by reporting on performance rather than seeking to communicate its full value.

²³ Formative evaluations as conducted by the EO are consultative and participative evaluation exercises.

▪ Decentralised level

The timeliness of country program evaluations is flagged as an area for improvement, as there is a perception that these arrive often too late to be considered wholly as part of the programming and planning cycle. Management requires more real-time evaluation.

At regional and country level the view is expressed that recommendations “do not necessarily fit to the context, can be generic to the point of being applicable to all programs, and are sometimes idealistic”. A lot of recommendations are perceived to be “boilerplate” in nature, even when appraised positively by the EQAA system, and it seems that it is more the rest of the report that is appreciated and used by management than the recommendation section.

There is an overall concern with evaluation recommendations that “feel like the old UNFPA”, when “our thinking has moved on”. Sometimes the recommendations are not seen to be keeping pace with the more strategic conversations that are taking place with country representatives and regional directors.

Regarding resources allocated to evaluation, COs raise first and foremost concerns about the lack of human resources dedicated to evaluation and/or the fact that evaluation staff aren’t positioned at the appropriate professional level (depending on COs people are sometimes overqualified for the kind of evaluation tasks they are affected to and sometimes they are not placed high enough in the hierarchy of the office to have sufficient consideration from management and to be able to work in fruitful collaboration).

In terms of financial resources, one of the main reasons given by COs for not conducting CPEs is that funding is insufficient to conduct “the type of standardized evaluation that is required for CPE” and that “there are more important program activities to allocate resources to”.

9. Utility and quality of evaluation

Conclusion: The review considers that the UNFPA evaluation function is managed with due regard for utility. This said, the review highlights the importance for UNFPA of adapting continuously its evaluation processes to best support the attainment of UNFPA’s mission in rapidly changing and challenging contexts.

In particular, there should be a focus on strengthening communication effectiveness, including the effectiveness of written reports relative to their intended readerships.

The review acknowledges that the EQAA system is functional and that it provides a measure of quality control at the planning stage and at the drafting stage of the evaluation process. It also finds that the ex-post quality assessment of completed evaluation reports allows for an assessment of progress over time of their quality, based on the report assessment criteria. Here as well, areas for improvement have been identified especially for some of the criteria and their specifications, against which reports are assessed.

9.1 Utility

The utility of UNFPA's evaluation function is manifest in different ways: the clear and explicitly stated intent of evaluation to support accountability, decision-making and knowledge generation; its use, through interactions with stakeholders at key points in the evaluation cycle, from programming, planning, conducting through to engaging on recommendations, responses and follow-up.

However, the review identified risks to utility, both at corporate and decentralised levels.

▪ Corporate

Management recognizes that evaluation results are an important source of knowledge for the organisation, to inform programming and organisational learning, in addition to other types of information that are at management's disposal. Evaluation are considered helpful to identify successful practices, challenges and lessons learned related to programmes.

When presented to the Executive Board of UNFPA, corporate evaluations are considered by management to be useful for presenting evidence of successes, for identifying what is not working well and how to correct it, and for providing independent authority to continue working on the difficult issues that fall within UNFPA's mandate, and to do so in a structured way. Corporate evaluations can add credibility to requests for sustaining and/or expanding programmes.

However, corporate evaluations are considered by interviewees as limited in their capacity "*to capture what has been social change and UNFPA's contribution to it*"; the "*rigorous approach*" perspective from the EO on how evaluation should be done "*doesn't seem to provide for a good understanding of the complex situations that we work in*". Overall, management considers that the EO should provide better tools to showcase the wider spectrum of what is done, especially how UNFPA produces and contributes to change, otherwise there is a risk that "*we end up with very limited image of what we do*".

▪ Decentralised

Decentralised evaluations, both in regions and countries, are seen often to be "*backward looking*" and "*telling us what we already know*" when what is needed is useful information to support forward looking strategic conversations and management decisions regionally and in countries. As well, management and staff perceive the conduct of evaluation as being based on a one-size-fits-all approach when it would be more helpful to have a nuanced, context aware and strategically informed consideration of the return on the investment for country program evaluations. Thematic evaluations and other evaluations that are linked to large joint programmes are more often considered useful in terms of feed-back and information.

Also, respondents regionally and in countries see little practical complementarity between the performance management and the evaluation functions, particularly the reasons for, and nature of, the data and information that each function requires of them. As such, these "*head office*" requirements are sometimes perceived as "*bureaucratic impositions*" with variable relevance to the realities that management and staff face in the field.

9.2 Quality

Through its participation in meetings and working sessions with EO staff and ROs, as well in its exchanges with interviewees, the review finds ample evidence of a strong commitment to the quality of evaluations at both central and decentralised levels. As well, it is clear to the review that the EO provides readily advice and guidelines to help decentralised levels to meet evaluation standards, and that both ROs and COs are committed to doing their best to meet organisational requirements regarding evaluation quality.

However, several opportunities for improvement have been identified regarding: guidance provided by the EO, the quality of evaluation reports both at corporate and decentralised levels as well as the quality assurance processes.

9.2.1 Guidance

At decentralised level, the EO provides guidance tools to plan and conduct evaluations with a view to bringing the quality of evaluation at UNFPA on a par with internationally recognized standards. The document most frequently quoted by interviewees is the “Handbook to conduct Country Programmes Evaluations (CPEs)”. However, their assessment of the Handbook is mixed.

Some staff find it useful for planning, designing and implementing evaluation processes, while some are more critical. “*The prerequisites specified for conducting an evaluation are not very practical*”. “It looks perfect but when you look at the result you get out of the process indicated, there is not much at the end.”

A clear message across respondents is that the prerequisites specified in the Handbook for designing the evaluation, i.e. the information to gather in the preliminary phase, is often either not clear, or fully available. Some staff think that it is not possible to evaluate without “*reconstructing the information*”, which can create a significant additional task for which time and resources may be limited.

Another message that clearly stands out from the review is that, overall, more adaptive guidance is needed, to facilitate going beyond checking if results have been reached. While it is important to see whether results have been achieved, decentralised offices are more interested in the “*why, how and what can be done*” than solely by “*does it work*”.

All respondents in countries expressed the need for a suite of available approaches and methodologies, including ways to evaluate quickly and inexpensively, and to inform and support implementation of UNFPA strategies. “*Rigorous methodologies with RCT, impact evaluation, scientific with all the data, such quality is impressive and useful to showcase for policy dialogue, for advocating, but we don’t have the money for that, so when we need to prioritize, evaluation falls off the list of things we can realistically do.*”

A key consideration for the EO should be revision of its guidance to include diversification of evaluation approaches and methodologies, with a view to keeping it practical and accessible.

9.2.2 Reports

For review respondents, the major point of attention for the decentralised level is the production and use of recommendations. In their view there is often a gap between findings and recommendations,

such that RO and CO staff reported that it can be “*really difficult to see how the evaluators jumped from one to the other*”.

Also, the recommendations are often found very broad and not very pragmatic “*the list was far too broad, and the focus was not there*”; “*even if the report was appraised of good quality by the EO, we could not really use it*”. “*We expect the recommendations to provide concrete guidelines on where to put our efforts and at the same time to be adequate to specific contexts of our CO, but the usefulness of what recommendations produced for planning is an issue.*”

The review considers that there is an opportunity for evaluations conducted at decentralised levels to apply the same type of process for developing the recommendations than the one used at corporate level, which is to organise workshops gathering the external evaluation team, the evaluation managers and management to construct appropriate and practical recommendations.

9.2.3 Evaluation quality assurance and quality assessment

The renewed Evaluation Quality Assurance and Quality Assessment (EQAA) system is designed to assure the quality of evaluation outputs consistent with UNEG norms and standards of independence, credibility and utility. It consists of two processes: Quality Assurance during the evaluation and ex-post Quality Assessment of evaluation reports.

UNFPA’s EQAA system combines aspects of quality control, i.e. vetting by the EO of evaluation terms of reference and of evaluation teams for decentralized evaluations, and of assessment of the quality of evaluation reports after they have been finalised. The quality assessments are published together with their corresponding evaluation reports, which contributes to the transparency and credibility of evaluation in UNFPA.

This said, based on the feedback from regional and country offices, as well as its consideration of the EQAA system and particularly its quality assessment template for reports, the review sees opportunities for improvement to the system and to its organisation.

Quality Assurance is done by the EO on draft inception report, case study reports (country and regional) and draft final report for corporate evaluations. For decentralised evaluations, the EO reviews and approves terms of reference for Country Programme evaluations (managed by country offices) and prequalifies evaluation teams. Regional M&E advisors are in charge to quality assure draft inception report and draft final reports.

From a decentralised perspective, the view was expressed that the EQAA can be burdensome, especially when evaluation has to be conducted by ROs or COs within swiftly changing contexts and within a short time frame. As well, despite the quality assurance process, intermediate evaluation products such as the terms of reference were not always sufficiently clear about what was the intended value addition of the evaluation. “*There is still is not enough attention paid to the TOR to distinctly explain what is expected to get out of the evaluations*”.

These concerns can lead to ROs and COs conducting “*reviews*” or “*light evaluations*”, that can provide useful information and knowledge more efficiently, without going through the formal UNFPA evaluation process, which may be considered heavy, slow and not necessarily conducive to quality and utility.

For the report Quality Assessment process, the review considers that the criteria and their specifications, against which reports are assessed could be improved on. The review assessed a small selection of recently completed evaluation reports that had been quality assessed as either good and very good, and found opportunities for improvements on how the reports address approach and methodology, clarity of findings and analysis, conclusions formulated as well as the quality of evaluation reports from a communications effectiveness perspective.

10. Recommendations

Recommendations will be the object of an Evaluation Office working session during which the reviewer will provide support, as the case may be, to their operationalisation by UNFPA.

10.1 Policy

The review recommends that the evaluation policy be updated for consistency with evolutions and changes both within UNFPA and in the broader UN and global contexts. It also recommends that the evaluation policy be adjusted to better reflect the priorities of UNFPA's 2018-2021 Strategy. Finally, the updated and adjusted evaluation policy should support and promote, change and innovation in UNFPA's evaluation practices²⁴.

10.2 Communication

The review recommends that presentations of results and recommendations from evaluations to the Executive Board be mindful of its governance function and its requirements. This means, among other considerations, not delving into technical and methodological information beyond what is necessary to provide the Board with information relevant to its strategic, policy and programming interests. Of course, the Board can in any event require whatever information it seeks and this recommendation should not be construed to limit its ability to do so. Rather, it is intended to strengthen the effectiveness of the evaluation function's communication with the Board.

10.3 Reframing evaluation

The review recommends that the EO guide the evaluation function in UNFPA towards a better balance between its accountability, decision support and learning pursuits, but as well, to consider how evaluation can contribute directly to mission-relevant outcomes for rights holders.

Achieving a more appropriate balance, including direct evaluation impact on rights holders, requires from the EO a conceptualisation of evaluation that, while including it, goes beyond the assessment of results, to encompass that of valuing. The rapidly evolving discipline of evaluation provides a rich and multifaceted universe of theory and of practice, of approaches and methodologies, from which to draw on.

As such, the EO should reframe progressively how the evaluation function understands its performance so that it goes beyond the "performance" that is described for example in its annual

²⁴ A list of suggestions and considerations for updates and changes to the current UNFPA evaluation policy can be found in annex to this report.

report, to how it provides positive contributions, i.e. value additions, to its stakeholders. Ultimately the effectiveness of the evaluation function should be viewed through the lens of the value it adds relative to the resources allocated to it, rather than solely on the quantity and quality of its production.

This has implications for the ongoing capacity development, i.e. professional development, of EO staff, for the guidance that EO provides to regional and country M&E staff, for its approach to supporting national evaluation capacity development and for its definition of evaluation quality.

10.4 Evaluation quality

The support provided by the EO should better integrate relevant developments in the theory and practice of evaluation, and the conception of evaluation quality should be based on a more comprehensive and value-based understanding of quality. This could mean for example, recognising and using fully the evaluation process as a driver of value, treating context more fulsomely as part of evaluation approach and methodology, including political economy, improving communication effectiveness, piloting innovative evaluations, etc. A key consideration for the EO should be revision of its guidance to include diversification of evaluation approaches and methodologies, with a view to keeping it practical and accessible.

10.5 Decentralised evaluation

The EO, in its role as custodian of the evaluation function in UNFPA, together with relevant stakeholders, should address progressively the nature and organisation of its evaluation function in countries. Indeed, the review found an array of perspectives among its respondents ranging from “*there should be dedicated evaluators in each office*”, through to “*there’s no need for evaluators in each office*”, and including, “*we need to phase out evaluation and let countries do it*”, “*there should be a pool of evaluators at regional level*”. The review’s recommendation shouldn’t be seen to suggest the same configuration in all cases, however a clearer frame of reference for the organisation of the evaluation function and its activities, regionally and in countries, would be helpful.

10.6 Evaluation reports

Based on its assessment of a selection of recent corporate evaluation reports, the review recommends that the EO address systematically the following observations.

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Methodology | <p>Evaluation reports should clearly and briefly describe the evaluation approach, i.e. the construct based on which the merit, worth or significance of the intervention is assessed, and refer to it in a consistent manner in the report as appropriate. The EO should consider making clear its terminology in this respect and in relation to methodology and its building blocks.</p> <p>Evaluation reports should clearly present an overarching evaluation question to frame the evaluation, distinct from the sub-set of specific evaluation questions, all the while making sure that questions are evaluative in nature. The analytical framework of the evaluation could be made clearer and be better communicated.</p> |
|-------------|--|

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Findings and analysis | In the reports that were considered, the review found that, often, the narrative merged data, findings of fact, evaluative assessments, elements of conclusion, in a manner that makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish between them. |
| Conclusions | Conclusions presented in the evaluation reports should be answers to the evaluation questions, presenting evaluative judgment as a result of evaluative reasoning, itself framed by the approach and the methodology. Conclusions should avoid repeating or extending what is stated in the findings section. |
| Communication | An evaluation report should be conceived as communication vehicle rather than as complete documentation of the evaluation, which is the function of the evaluation dossier. Reports that are accessible, clear, readable and to the point are more likely to be meaningful and useful to the readership. |

The review suggests that the observations made above based on its assessment of a few corporate evaluation reports, may also provide opportunities for improvement to reports from decentralised evaluations.

The review recommends that evaluations conducted at decentralised levels apply the same type of process for developing the recommendations than the one used at corporate level, which is to organise workshops gathering the external evaluation team, the evaluation managers and management to construct appropriate and practical recommendations.

10.7 Quality assurance and assessment

Evaluation in UNFPA is being called upon increasingly to be responsive to rapid and significant changes in global context, the 2030 agenda, UN reform, rapidly evolving evaluation knowledge and practice, UNFPA strategy, opportunities for partnerships, the development of national capacities and the empowerment of rights holders.

As UNFPA’s evaluation function takes up these challenges, as it does in its proposed Strategy 2018-2021, it is logical and important that the EQAA and its tools follow suit.

The review sees opportunities for improvement to the EQAA system and to its organisation and recommends that the EO consider the following observations.

As CPEs and broad thematic and institutional evaluations are different types of evaluative exercises be it in their scope, approach and overall conduct, the review recommends that the EO consider the opportunity of taking into account these differences in the EQAA system and processes.

Centralised quality control of terms of reference and of evaluation consultants could be reviewed in favour of a more decentralised form of organisation, for example to regional monitoring and evaluation functions.

For the report Quality Assessment process, the review considers that the criteria and their specifications, against which reports are assessed could be improved on, especially for those regarding the structure and quality of reporting as well as the design and methodology.

The review assessed a small selection of recently completed evaluation reports that had been quality assessed as either good or very good, and found opportunities for improvements on how the reports address approach and methodology, clarity of findings and analysis, conclusions formulated as well as the quality of evaluation reports from a communications effectiveness perspective.

The review recommends that, as part of its continuous improvement, the EO update progressively its EQAA system to address the preceding observations.

Annex - Considerations for revising the policy document

1. To update

The following are considerations that could be taken into account to update the policy, to adapt it to new strategies and terminology appropriate to Sustainable Development Goals and to the evolving context.

| Elements considered as to update | Location in the document | Suggested updates |
|--|---|--|
| <i>References to background and context elements</i> | Parag. 1,2,3,4,5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be updated to reflect the current context and could include references to the current process. |
| <i>References to the consistency of the policy with UNFPA Strategic Plan 2008-2013 and its 2011 MTR etc.</i> | Parag. 5 and 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be updated for the new strategic plan 2018-2021, the QCPR etc. |
| <i>References to the Millennium Development Goals</i> | Parag. 6,7,8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be updated for the SDGs. |
| <i>Reference to UNEG norms for evaluation</i> | Parag. 9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be updated for UNEG norms and standards (the norms are no longer a stand-alone document, N&S are now interrelated both in terms of structure and content). |
| <i>Reference to the oversight policy</i> | Parag. 12 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be updated for the reference to the new oversight policy. |
| <i>Reference to biennial evaluation plans</i> | Parag. 16, 20, 23, 24, 37 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be updated for quadrennial evaluation plan. |
| <i>Reference to “Fusion” as knowledge sharing platform</i> | Parag. 34 and also in the annex on the overview of roles and responsibilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be removed as it seems it does not exist. |
| <i>Section on “Operationalization and review of the policy”,</i> | Parag. 37, 38, 39, 40 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This section includes references to the first annual work plan in 2014, etc. and could be updated for reflecting the current context and process. |
| <i>Reference to the 2013 evaluation policy</i> | Parag. 41 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be updated for the reference of the new document. |

2. To adjust

The following are considerations that could be taken into account to adjust the policy to better integrate contextual evolutions and the necessary evolutions of the evaluation function.

| <i>Elements considered as to adjust</i> | <i>Location in the document</i> | <i>Suggested adjustments</i> |
|--|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>Roles and responsibilities for corporate and decentralized function</i> | Parag. 19 to 28 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinction between corporate-level and programme-level decentralized evaluations could be made clearer along the policy developments, especially the roles and responsibilities in relation to the programme-level decentralized function. • Also could be clarified: a) the connection between the EO and other parts of UNFPA b) the requirements of these other divisions toward evaluation (already in the annex of the current policy but not very clear. Additionally, having a “model” mapping the different units involved and their relationships would facilitate the visualization). |
| Use of evaluation | Parag. 33 to 36 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dissemination, use and utilization of evaluation could be further specified. • Connection with UNFPA transformative results could be explained. |
| Coverage | Parag.13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “CPE will be conducted at least once in every two programme cycles” Rather than fix the rate of CPE to programme cycle, it may make more sense to require that programme design be informed by relevant, reliable and timely knowledge and/or evidence. How that is generated, e.g. through a CPE or another type of evaluative process, and the options for doing so are what could appear in an evaluation policy. The policy should support variety. i.e. no one size fits all, and innovation. • To complete the coverage aspect, considerations could be clarified on (a) the way what is evaluated is selected (why question), (b) how it is done. |
| Links to external environment | Parag. 14, 17, 24, 27, 30, 32 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for system-wide evaluations that goes beyond joint evaluations could be added. • The document could highlight a commitment for a stronger presence in NECD and partnerships. • Agenda 2030 and Humanitarian nexus/interventions could be integrated. |
| Resources | Parag. 32 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “up to 3% of the programme budget to evaluation” the option to distinguish resources for corporate and decentralized evaluations could be considered, including a specification on a mechanism to ring-fence resources |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | | <p>allocated to the decentralized function (as a mechanism: could an option be to mutualize the 3% of country programmes (core and non-core resources) at global or regional level for a reallocation depending on needs? Of course there are a couple of risks here: first is that there be “less ownership”, e.g. that evaluation be seen to be “external” to the reality of program and that it become an expectation to receive “central” funds in the absence of which evaluation would not be done; second that, as a result, of pooling, available funding for central evaluations decrease. To mitigate these risks, one option could be to have a form of decentralized management of this pool.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also the option to reformulate “<i>up to 3% of the programme budget (core and non-core resources) to evaluation</i>” for providing a floor of 3% instead of a ceiling could be considered. |
| <p>Definitions</p> | <p>Parag.12, 14</p> <p>(And also further the Definition Chapter, in parag.18, 20, 22, etc.)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This section could include sub-sections, such as (a) Definition, (b) Purpose, (c) Concepts • The content of each subsection could be slightly rearranged especially the content of the sub-section on definitions, to include a few key definitions important at policy level. • “<i>An evaluation should provide evidence-based information that is credible, reliable and useful, enabling the timely incorporation of findings, recommendations and lessons into decision making processes.</i>” (Parag.12) “<i>(...) that can provide sound findings, recommendations and lessons learned?</i>” (Parag.14) <p>If not clarified in the definition chapter, the distinction between “findings” and “recommendations” could at least be done along the policy while highlighting the importance of conclusions. As it stands, the primary «focus» is on findings and conclusions, which bypasses conclusions while the “value” brought by evaluation lies (beyond its process) in its conclusions presenting the evaluative judgment.</p> |
| <p>Structure & overall content</p> | <p>Parag. 3, 11, 12, 28</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As it stands, the policy seems too prescriptive and reflects late 20th century report writing whereas it the policy should deal with the nature and intent of communication relative to evaluation, internally, externally, during and after, with stakeholders, etc. A more modern structure and support could be envisaged. • As this is a policy for the evaluation function, the document could avoid presenting “<i>monitoring and evaluation</i>” or “<i>evaluation and monitoring</i>”. |

3. To rephrase

The following are considerations that could be taken into account to rephrase and clarify some policy elements:

| Elements considered as to rephrase | Location in the document | Suggested considerations for rephrasing |
|---|---------------------------------|--|
| <i>“evaluation generally consist in 6 phases (...)” and “ask 4 key questions (...)”</i> | Parag. 10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The policy could make clear what is the intended value added of the function and then each evaluation should be able to explain that in its own right and context. Again, there needs to be flexibility built in with accompanying quality management processes that allow for learning and for achieving results. |
| <i>“A prerequisite for evaluation and monitoring is a coherent results framework.”</i> | Parag. 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This could be removed as it is rather inaccurate. • Overall the policy should also avoid presenting monitoring and monitoring related activities/tools/components as prerequisites for evaluation. |
| <i>“Evaluations depends on the quality of the design of programmes so that results are clear, measurable (...)”</i> | Parag. 17 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be suppressed/adjusted. |
| The way the evaluation function reports on what has been done according to <i>“compliance, coverage, quality and recommendations”</i> | Parag. 20 and 24 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be adjusted as some criteria as applied are derived from an audit framework that doesn't allow to report properly on evaluation |
| Quality assurance | Parag. 29 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality control and Quality Assurance mechanisms could be distinguished. |