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**UNFPA – Evaluation**

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**Formative evaluation of the UNFPA approach to South-South and triangular cooperation**

***Summary***

The Evaluation Office conducted this formative evaluation of the UNFPA approach to South-South and triangular cooperation, as part of the quadrennial budgeted evaluation plan (2018-2021).

Covering 2017-2020, the evaluation provides evaluative input on the lessons learned as well as enabling factors and challenges of UNFPA supported South-South and triangular cooperation interventions, in order to inform the current and future implementation of the UNFPA corporate strategy on South-South and triangular cooperation.

## I. Background

1. Today more than ever, international development necessitates cooperation among countries to better respond to the complex, cross-border challenges and crises worldwide. South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) recognizes the value in international solidarity and multi-stakeholder collaboration to promote a more inclusive, responsive and coherent approach to sustainable development. By sharing knowledge, skills, resources and technical know-how, especially between countries that share a common cultural context and development situation, SSTC serves as a strategic modality to complement traditional forms of development cooperation to renew, revitalize, and multiply development efforts.
2. The growing importance of SSTC globally is reflected in its inclusion in major international development frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and International Conference on Population and Development, both of which recognize SSTC as an important development instrument.
3. In its corporate documents relating to SSTC, including its corporate strategy, UNFPA aligns with the internationally agreed principles and definitions of SSTC, in particular noting SSTC as a demand-driven, reciprocal and ownership-oriented modality for collaborative initiatives among developing countries. In addition, other South-South cooperation principles, such as multi-stakeholder approaches, absence of conditionality, mutual benefit and equality of partners, are also included in UNFPA SSTC documents,<sup>1</sup> to align with established international standards (e.g. the High-Level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation (2009) and the Second High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation (known as BAPA+40 Conference)).
4. South-South and triangular cooperation, together with partnerships and coordination, has for a long time been recognized by UNFPA as an important programmatic approach in the achievement of its three transformative results as well as the broader development agendas. UNFPA engagement in SSTC is intended to vary from acting as a broker for SSTC among Southern partners to supporting SSTC exchanges operationally and technically, to documenting and showcasing SSTC results and to foster knowledge sharing among partners.

## II. Purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation

5. This exercise is a formative evaluation designed and conducted to enhance the utilization of findings and to inform forward-looking decisions on SSTC strategies and processes at UNFPA, by taking stock of initial progress, lessons learned, enabling factors and challenges of UNFPA support to SSTC at the global, regional and country levels during 2017-2020. Key users include the Inter-Country Cooperation Office (ICCO), senior management, business units at the global, regional and country levels, the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, UNFPA partner countries, and other stakeholders in the area of SSTC.
6. The specific objectives of the evaluation were to: (a) assess the strategic approach of UNFPA to SSTC, including the vision for future direction and how this fits into achieving the strategic plan and transformative results; (b) assess the appropriateness of the SSTC strategy in terms of conceptual framework, principles, implementation mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation; (c) take stock and provide learning to inform the operationalization of the SSTC strategy and implementation; (d) identify SSTC

<sup>1</sup> UNFPA Guidance Note on South-South and Triangular Cooperation in Programming, 2017, p. 6.

approaches at other United Nations organizations that could be adjusted and applied to UNFPA; and (e) inform the design of the next strategic plan, for 2022-2025.

### III. Evaluation methodology

7. The evaluation methodology followed a mixed multi-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, including desk review of documentation, key informant interviews, case studies, a global online survey and a comparative study of SSTC approaches in different United Nations agencies.
8. Triangulation of data was ensured through the systematic cross-checking of pieces of evidence from different sources and tools and by applying various data analysis methods. Internal validation took place through revisions among evaluation team members and between the team and the UNFPA Evaluation Office. External validation consisted of presentations and discussions of findings in debriefings and workshops with external stakeholders.
9. A total of 239 key informants (136 female; 103 male) were interviewed across 10 country offices, regional offices and headquarters divisions. Out of these key informants, 122 were internal to UNFPA and 117 external, across academia, donors, governments, implementing partners and other United Nations agencies. Overall, 217 documents were reviewed, and 372 UNFPA staff responded to the global online survey.
10. An unforeseen limitation to the exercise was the global COVID-19 pandemic that struck during the implementation of the evaluation. To address the particular challenges of in-person data collection during that time, mitigating measures were introduced, including the shifting of the remaining field-based case studies to desk-based case studies as well as remote validation meetings and workshops.

### IV. Conclusions

***Conclusion 1. UNFPA has made progress with institutionalizing SSTC in recent years. At the global level, UNFPA has taken fundamental steps to raise the profile of and capacity for SSTC.***

11. This includes introducing SSTC as a fifth mode of engagement in the Strategic Plan, 2018-2021, developing an organizational strategy on SSTC, and establishing a dedicated unit, the ICCO, to implement the strategy. In recent years, UNFPA has made additional advancements in raising the profile and capacity for SSTC through new guidance and tools, and institutional processes and mechanisms to manage and facilitate SSTC across its regional and country offices. These developments, along with others, demonstrate a continuing trend of positive progress of UNFPA support to SSTC.
12. This evaluation also highlights there are further opportunities to explore, building on the momentum and positive gains thus far, to ensure that SSTC is a key strategic modality that is well understood, and more importantly, effectively utilized to accelerate progress towards the ICPD and 2030 Agenda, and within the context of United Nations reform.
13. While the SSTC strategy and related guidance provide a broad understanding of SSTC concepts and principles, they would benefit from more practical application of SSTC principles, and in particular, specific concrete guidance to better contextualize and adapt SSTC interventions at the country and regional levels. This includes clarification on how SSTC can be applied across all its modes of engagement, its thematic areas of

intervention and within the framework of its business model. Further, there are some examples of SSTC good practice which UNFPA can draw upon, systemize and expand on to further mainstream SSTC into its work, and ultimately, improve the SSTC impact across the organization.

***Conclusion 2. There is a very diverse understanding and application of SSTC across UNFPA.***

14. While there is considerable familiarity with SSTC concepts and principles, the understanding and implementation of SSTC interventions is varied across regional and country offices. The corporate strategy for SSTC envisages the role of UNFPA in three types of engagement: (a) acting as a broker for SSTC among Southern partners; (b) supporting SSTC exchanges operationally and technically; and (c) documenting and showcasing SSTC results to foster knowledge sharing among partners. However, the strategy does not provide clear guidance on the level of engagement by UNFPA or the resources required for such engagement.
15. Moreover, there is a lack of specific guidance to adapt SSTC to the diverse operational contexts in which UNFPA works. The specific role of regional and country offices in SSTC implementation is unclear, leading to varied approaches to the design, implementation and follow-up to SSTC initiatives. This has further implications on the internal coordination of SSTC, processes of monitoring and evaluating SSTC interventions, as well as the financial and human resources required to successfully undertake SSTC initiatives.

***Conclusion 3. Mechanisms are in place to coordinate SSTC initiatives, both internal and external to UNFPA. However, there are opportunities to strengthen these further.***

16. To effectively support the coordination of SSTC initiatives, UNFPA has established a dedicated unit at the global level and ad-hoc focal point structures at the regional and country levels to better facilitate SSTC across and between regions. However, this evaluation found that such coordination at the regional and country levels is limited. SSTC has been largely driven by the initiative and leadership of individual staff, rather than systematically through these institutional mechanisms.
17. Further, there is a limited collaboration between UNFPA thematic areas and other divisions in SSTC design and implementation. While one of the UNFPA comparative advantage in supporting SSTC is its global network and broker potential, its reach and capacity is limited due to the unclear roles and responsibilities of headquarters and the regional and country offices in coordinating these initiatives.
18. In addition, a clear understanding and concrete guidance on how to coordinate with external partners on SSTC initiatives was limited. With regard to synergies with other United Nations agencies, UNFPA is active in SSTC interagency group as well as joint initiatives. However, coordination is not consistent across all regions and there is no clear strategy or practical guidance to support an enhanced investment in these wider arrangements to scale-up SSTC initiatives.
19. The evaluation also identified additional opportunities for cross-learning from UNFPA experience in SSTC, for instance as a mechanism for advocacy and mobilising strategic partners within communities in partnership with civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, traditional communicators and community leaders.

***Conclusion 4. Efforts to increase staff capacity and mainstream SSTC into the work of UNFPA have advanced, but can be broadened in the quantity and type of capacity development opportunities.***

20. To date, there are some capacity development tools – online training courses and programmatic guidelines – that are available to UNFPA staff to enhance their skills for facilitating SSTC.

21. While the evaluation found these tools were clear and useful to UNFPA staff, they could be further developed to provide more in-depth and practical guidance on how to implement SSTC at regional and country levels, across different thematic areas of UNFPA work, in varied contexts, and within the framework of its business model. In particular, there is a need for strengthened guidance and capacity building tools in the monitoring and evaluation of SSTC experiences, an area of SSTC implementation that the evaluation found weak at all levels.
22. This has implications on not just accurately and systematically capturing SSTC results, but also on the ability of staff to harness the knowledge, lessons learned and good practice from past SSTC interventions to inform their future efforts in SSTC.

***Conclusion 5. Sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (SRHR) and population dynamics are strongly reflected within SSTC, and there are additional opportunities for UNFPA to leverage SSTC towards other development outcomes.***

23. SSTC has actively supported the achievements of several results in the areas of SRHR and population dynamics, while SSTC on aging initiatives is seen as a promising area for the future, especially since it is becoming a priority across several regions.
24. Gender equality is an area less addressed by SSTC initiatives, while adolescents and youth, and those in humanitarian settings, remain more emerging and ad hoc initiatives. In this view, there is a strong evidence base to continue SSTC programming in SRHR and population dynamics as well as opportunities for growth of SSTC initiatives for adolescents and youth, gender equality and humanitarian programming.
25. In particular, SSTC for adolescents and youth has clear linkages to peer-to-peer learning methodologies already used within youth programming. The digital fora established can work well with youth populations. SSTC for humanitarian initiatives has a clear potential for middle-income countries experiencing displacement across borders, and moving forward, for the COVID-19 response across all global South countries. Finally, SSTC could be leveraged more effectively for cross-mandate promotion and working across the triple nexus.

***Conclusion 6. There are processes and mechanisms in place to manage and facilitate SSTC initiatives, but these can be further developed and systematized.***

26. Specifically, the follow-up (tracking results and reporting) to SSTC exchanges at the country level is weak, resulting in gaps in capturing SSTC effectiveness and learning for future initiatives. Past efforts in identifying and showcasing good practice (e.g. UNFPA SSTC good practice competition) has proven a valuable exercise and an incentive for country offices to showcase their work. Monitoring and evaluation of UNFPA-supported SSTC initiatives is limited and inconsistent, posing a challenge to enhancing SSTC effectiveness. Strengthening such mechanisms can lead to a more accurate demonstration of results achieved through SSTC, increased availability, accessibility, visibility and sharing of SSTC experience.

## V. Recommendations

27. The following four recommendations are based on the analysis that informed the findings and conclusions, and on discussions held with the evaluation reference group.

***Recommendation 1. UNFPA should clarify the conceptualization of SSTC and further integrate SSTC into the strategic frameworks and thematic areas of UNFPA.***

28. While the current corporate strategy for SSTC helps to broadly understand and guide SSTC interventions, UNFPA should further clarify its conceptualization to ensure that SSTC is effectively and more systematically utilized as a key strategy to further

support the ICPD and the 2030 Agenda. This includes providing a clear definition of SSTC at UNFPA, the role of UNFPA in SSTC interventions, and the potential application of SSTC across all modes of engagement, its core mandate areas, and within the framework of its business model.

29. This would require the development of a theory of change to provide a more articulated connection between SSTC and broader development issues and processes, such as the United Nations engagement with middle-income countries, United Nations system reform and the contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals.
30. Further, SSTC should be further integrated into the strategic frameworks, and supported with budgetary resources, to ensure that SSTC is reflected as an integral way of working to contribute to the UNFPA mandate. Complementing this, UNFPA should further clarify the potential opportunities of SSTC in all of its thematic areas of its intervention, especially deepening the focus in the areas of youth and adolescents, as well as in humanitarian contexts, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
31. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
  - (a) Review the existing SSTC strategy and guidance documents and provide clarifications where needed;
  - (b) Develop an overarching theory of change for SSTC that can be adapted to different regions and contexts, and that connects SSTC with broader international agendas;
  - (c) Integrate SSTC as a key strategy into the next strategic plan (for 2022-2025), including the specification of SSTC indicators in its results framework and dedicated financial resources in the integrated budget;
  - (d) Mainstream SSTC into other strategic frameworks, including global and regional action plans and budgets, and the middle-income countries strategy;
  - (e) Include clear and specific guidance on leveraging SSTC in all thematic guidelines and strategies.

***Recommendation 2. UNFPA should enhance SSTC implementation at regional and country levels.***

32. While the facilitation of SSTC has greatly improved since the establishment of the ICCO, there are still opportunities to enhance implementation at regional and country levels.
33. At the regional level, UNFPA should clarify the role of the regional office, as it is uniquely positioned to facilitate SSTC interventions both within and between regions. At the country level, UNFPA should integrate, as appropriate, SSTC as a core component of country programme planning and implementation, supported by a dedicated budget.
34. Further, in collaboration with regional offices and headquarters, country offices should – in partnership with other stakeholders – continue to provide support to, and further seek to establish centres of excellence on SSTC, leveraging these institutions as knowledge hubs to foster exchange and facilitate SSTC in more effective and self-sustaining ways.
35. Finally, UNFPA should invest in continuing building strategic partnerships with other development actors at regional and country levels, including regional bodies and non-traditional partners (ministries responsible for SSTC at country level, subnational entities, non-governmental organizations, academia, and the private sector).
36. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
  - (a) Clarify the roles and responsibilities of headquarters, regional offices and country offices in the coordination and facilitation of SSTC initiatives;

- (b) Integrate SSTC into the terms of reference of regional offices and job descriptions of targeted regional office staff;
- (c) Allocate a dedicated budget for SSTC in country and regional programme documents;
- (d) Map opportunities for supporting the establishment of SSTC centres of excellence at regional level, and provide – as feasible – technical and financial support to national agencies that have the interest and capacity to host SSTC centres of excellence;
- (e) Identify, establish or strengthen partnerships with government agencies and other partners at country level, and, where applicable, regional bodies/organizations responsible for SSTC.

***Recommendation 3. UNFPA should strengthen the capacity of staff to effectively facilitate SSTC interventions.***

- 37. Building on the success of existing SSTC capacity building and guidance tools, UNFPA should develop additional in-depth training as well as practical, context-aware guidance and learning events for the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of SSTC. Capacity building for SSTC should respond directly to ICCO, regional office and country office needs, and also take into consideration the current capacity of staff across all business units to undertake key activities that improve SSTC results (measurement and monitoring of SSTC, implementation of SSTC across different modes of engagement, advocacy and outreach).
- 38. This calls for the development of targeted and more in-depth training, and in particular the regular scheduling of SSTC capacity-building workshops or events (virtual or in-person) to ensure that up-to-date knowledge and opportunities are shared.
- 39. To complement these efforts, UNFPA should clarify existing guidance on SSTC implementation, specifying a more practical application of SSTC principles as well as concrete operational actions to mainstream SSTC into the work of regional offices and country offices.
- 40. To achieve this, UNFPA should:
  - (a) Develop various training and learning events to accommodate staff at all levels, and employ different types and modalities of capacity building;
  - (b) Integrate SSTC awareness-raising and capacity-development activities into annual meetings or events across regions, such as regional planning or leadership meetings;
  - (c) Gather feedback and track progress on SSTC-related learning needs from regional offices and country offices, and address them by conducting annual reviews;
  - (d) Increase capacity of the ICCO in targeted areas critical for UNFPA to become a global leader in SSTC, including advocacy and communications, and analysis of SSTC programming activities.

***Recommendation 4. UNFPA should improve monitoring and evaluation of SSTC interventions, and strengthen efforts in the communication and knowledge management of SSTC results.***

- 41. To enhance organizational learning and accountability, UNFPA should review existing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate SSTC interventions in order to be able to regularly and accurately capture results and address current evidence gaps. This should be integrated into the design of the forthcoming enterprise resource planning system.
- 42. Further, UNFPA should enhance its efforts to communicate SSTC results to better demonstrate its programmatic impacts and showcase UNFPA experience in SSTC to audiences both within and external to the organization.
- 43. Finally, UNFPA should strengthen its approach to the knowledge management of SSTC results in order to improve availability and access to evidence-based learning on UNFPA-supported SSTC interventions and to better facilitate the use of SSTC results.

44. To achieve this, UNFPA should:

- (a) Establish an improved monitoring and evaluation mechanism for SSTC interventions, that can be integrated into the forthcoming enterprise resource planning system;
  - (b) Provide practical guidance for country offices, regional offices and thematic divisions on how to evaluate SSTC initiatives either as individual initiatives or as a cluster of initiatives;
  - (c) Synthesize and showcase validated good practice and lessons learned of UNFPA experience in SSTC based on assessments and evaluations managed by regional offices and country offices;
  - (d) Develop and utilize knowledge management platforms and tools both internal and external to the organization.
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