



Independent evaluation of UNFPA support to the integration of the principles of 'leaving no one behind' and 'reaching the furthest behind'

2018-2024

Evaluation Report

2025



UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office

Karen Cadondon	Evaluation Manager
Donna Mertens	External Evaluation Adviser

Evaluation team (Euro Health Group)

Katie Tong	Team Leader, Gender-based Violence, Protection and Inclusion Expert
Melissa Pomeroy	Equity, Social Justice and Rights Expert
Yemurai Nyoni	Evaluation Specialist, Youth Advocacy, Accountability, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
Emma Pearce	Gender, Inclusion and Disabilities Expert
Giulia Mantovani	Data Analyst
Maiken Mansfeld Jacobsen	Quality Assurance and Project Director



Copyright © UNFPA 2025, all rights reserved.

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

-  unfpa.org/evaluation
-  evaluation.office@unfpa.org
-  [@unfpa_eval](https://twitter.com/unfpa_eval)
-  [@UNFPA_EvaluationOffice](https://www.youtube.com/@UNFPA_EvaluationOffice)
-  [UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office](https://www.linkedin.com/company/unfpa-independent-evaluation-office/)

Cover photo: Marijoe Pierre, General Coordinator of the Association of Disabled Women of the South, visiting GADES (Groupe d'Appui au Développement du Sud), a UNFPA supported safe space that serves at risk women and girls and survivors of gender-based violence in Haiti. © UNFPA/Ralph Tedy Erol.

This evaluation and related products are available at <https://www.unfpa.org/lnob-evaluation>.

Evaluation Reference Group

Cecile Mazzacurati	Gender and Human Rights Adviser, West and Central Africa Regional Office
Elena Pirondini	Chief, Executive Board Branch
Emilie Filmer-Wilson	Human Rights Adviser, Programme Division
Jennet Appova	Regional Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office
Joanna Friedman	Cash and Voucher Assistance Specialist, Humanitarian Response Division
Laura Gonzalez Garces	Regional Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser, Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office
Luciano Costantino	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Specialist, Division for Human Resources
Maria Bakaroudis	Comprehensive Sexuality Education Specialist, Leave No One Behind and Disability Inclusion Focal Point, East and Southern Africa Regional Office
Nathaly Guzmán Figueroa	Disability Inclusion and Gender Programme Specialist, Gender, Human Rights, and Inclusion Branch
Virpi Mesiäislehto	Disability Inclusion Senior Technical Specialist, Gender, Human Rights, and Inclusion Branch
Oyuntsetseg Chuluundorj	Regional Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser, Asia Pacific Regional Office
Patricia Da Silva	Programme Adviser, Gender, Human Rights, and Inclusion Branch
Thi Kieu Oanh Nguyen	Regional Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser, Arab States Regional Office
Vivienne Wang	Strategic Planning and Knowledge Management Adviser, Programme Division

Steering Committee members

Foni Joyce Vuni	Programme Coordinator, Global Refugee Youth Network
José Viera	Executive Director, International Disability Alliance
Maegen Shanks	Disability Rights Activist, Ph.D. Candidate in the School of International Service at American University, and Faculty of International Development MA Program at Gallaudet University
Myrna Cunningham Kain	Miskitu Indigenous Peoples Activist
Nulu Nanono	Demographer and Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
Tarcila Rivera Zea	President, Center for Indigenous Cultures of Peru (CHIRAPAQ), Former Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2017–2019)

Foreword

The principles of leaving no one behind (LNOB) and reaching the furthest behind (RFB) are not mere aspirations, rather they are fundamental to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and lie at the heart of UNFPA's mission to ensure rights and choices for all. This evaluation, the first of its kind at UNFPA, assesses how well UNFPA has integrated the principles of LNOB and RFB into its organization. The evaluation arrives at a pivotal moment, as intersecting global crises - political shifts, austerity and economic downturns, conflict, climate change and deepening inequalities - underscore the urgent need to prioritize those most at risk of being left behind.

Notably, this evaluation was designed to not only assess UNFPA's LNOB efforts but also embody the principles it sought to measure. The evaluation made a conscious effort to engage with those rights holders who are furthest behind, making their participation in the evaluation an objective in itself. A Steering Committee was formed with the express purpose of sharing power with the communities that are often left behind and bringing them to the centre of the exercise. The Steering Committee included individuals with lived experiences of exclusion and discrimination, including indigenous peoples, refugees, and persons with disabilities. As co-managers in this evaluation, their insights were instrumental in shaping both the evaluation process itself and this report.

Findings from the evaluation recognize UNFPA's leadership in promoting an intersectional approach to tackling exclusion. They also commended UNFPA's generation and use of disaggregated population data to inform its targeted interventions. The evaluation further recognizes the agency's strong and meaningful engagement with civil society, particularly with user-led organizations and its ability to adapt LNOB strategies to address emerging vulnerabilities across various contexts, including in humanitarian and middle-income settings.

However, the findings also reveal that important work remains. The evaluation highlights key opportunities for UNFPA to further strengthen its LNOB efforts, particularly in humanitarian contexts. It calls for a deeper integration of LNOB within its existing human rights-based approaches, the cultivation of a more inclusive organizational culture, and the strengthening of institutional accountability to ensure the consistent and meaningful application of LNOB principles across all levels of the organization.

To realize the full transformative promise of leaving no one behind, the evaluation urges UNFPA to move beyond rhetoric and “tick-box” activities towards approaches that are intersectional, evidence-based, and genuinely community-led. UNFPA is uniquely positioned to lead such a response, but it requires focusing on people over numbers, rebalancing power dynamics, and embracing new ways of thinking about how systems, structures, and partnerships can be designed to better uphold dignity, equity and inclusion at every level.

This evaluation is both a reflection of where UNFPA stands and a clear roadmap for its future. I am confident its recommendations will strengthen UNFPA’s LNOB response across all settings, as we navigate a world grappling with deepening crises and intersecting inequalities. Together, let us reaffirm our shared responsibility: not only to reach those furthest behind, but to reimagine and reshape the very systems that leave them behind in the first place.

Marco Segone

Director, UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office

Preface

As the members of the Steering Committee for this evaluation, we are grateful for the opportunity to meaningfully contribute our voices - voices that are too often excluded from development discourse. Representing a diversity of experiences and identities, we were invited to co-manage this evaluation alongside the UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office.

This inclusive approach went beyond representation. It created space for us to reflect honestly on what truly works, what doesn't, and under what circumstances drawing from our real experiences. Through this process, we gained a deeper understanding of both the progress that UNFPA has made and the persistent gaps that continue to hinder transformative change.

The findings of this evaluation call for deeper structural, operational and institutional shifts to move from intention to action and from promises to lived realities. They offer important guidance on strengthening accountability, fostering inclusive leadership, elevating voices that have long been marginalized, and advancing equity across all areas of the organisation. The path forward demands renewed commitment and collective effort, and with these grounded reflections, we believe UNFPA is better positioned to help shape a future that is more inclusive, responsive and sustainable to all.

As a group, we remain committed to advancing intersectional monitoring and evaluation practices that center the experience and leadership of those most often left behind. We hope the insights of this exercise continue to inform and inspire effective and equitable evaluation approaches across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religion and language.

We thank the UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office and evaluation team for their openness and fostering a truly collaborative and inclusive environment. Their efforts to ensure equitable and meaningful participation in this evaluation enabled each of us to contribute fully and authentically.

Members of the Steering Committee

Acknowledgements

This evaluation would not have been possible without the dedication, insights and collaboration of many individuals and organizations. I am deeply grateful to all those who contributed their time, expertise and perspectives throughout the evaluation process.

I particularly want to thank UNFPA colleagues for their active engagement and ongoing support. Special appreciation to the LNOB team within the Gender, Human Rights and Inclusion Branch, in particular, Patricia da Silva, Nathaly Guzmán Figueroa, Virpi Mesiäislehto and Emilie Filmer-Wilson for their valuable contributions throughout the evaluation process.

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to the UNFPA regional and country offices that participated in the geographic and thematic case studies. This includes colleagues in the regional offices of Asia and the Pacific, Arab States, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, East and Southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and West and Central Africa, as well as colleagues in the country offices of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, China, Costa Rica, Iran, Malawi, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Sudan, Thailand, Türkiye, and the Whole of Syria response. Their thoughtful reflections and rich contextual knowledge were essential in ensuring that the evaluation accurately reflected the complexity and diversity of LNOB efforts across the wide range of contexts in which UNFPA operates.

I am also deeply grateful to the members of the Evaluation Reference Group, whose technical expertise and steadfast engagement helped strengthen the reliability and usefulness of this report. I am especially grateful to Dr. Donna Mertens, who served as an advisor to this evaluation. Her guidance and leadership inspired us to stretch our thinking to reimagine evaluation not only as a means of measurement, but also as a powerful tool for inclusion, equity and social change. My sincere thanks also to the Steering Committee for their active participation and for bringing their critical experiences and perspectives to the heart of this evaluation. Their engagement helped ensure that the evaluation remained grounded, inclusive, and representative of those most often left behind.

Finally, I extend my appreciation to all stakeholders who generously shared their time and insights, including government representatives, development partners, United Nations agencies, civil society organizations, in particular, rights holder-led groups. These contributions were vital in enhancing the credibility, depth and relevance of this evaluation.

Karen Cadondon

Evaluation Specialist, UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office

Contents

Foreword	4
Preface	6
Acknowledgements	7
Acronyms	11
Glossary	12
Executive summary	14
1. Introduction	21
2. Context	25
2.1 Global context of LNOB	25
2.2 LNOB and global commitments	28
2.3 UNFPA integration of LNOB principles	29
3. Methodology	34
3.1 Evaluation approach	34
3.2 Theory of change and evaluation matrix	35
3.3 Methods and tools	40
3.4 Data analysis methods	46
3.5 Generation of recommendations	48
3.6 Quality assurance	49
3.7 LNOB transformative continuum	49
3.8 An inclusive and participatory approach	50
3.9 Ethical considerations	53
3.10 Limitations and mitigations	55
4. Findings	60
4.1 Relevance	60
4.2 Effectiveness and sustainability	72
4.3 Effectiveness - humanitarian	91
4.4 Coherence	102
4.5 Efficiency	116
5. Conclusions	135
6. Recommendations	142

Tables

Table 1:	Short evaluation matrix with evaluation questions	38
Table 2:	Overview of data collection methods across datasets	41
Table 3:	Strength of evidence rating for key findings	48
Table 4:	Limitations and mitigation measures	55

Figures

Figure 1:	Gender Plus and furthest behind factors	31
Figure 2:	Identified internal and external barriers to LNOB and RFB	32
Figure 3:	A feminist research framework	35
Figure 4:	Constructed evaluation theory of change	37
Figure 5:	Core datasets and sources of evidence	40
Figure 6:	Descriptive overview of data collected for the evaluation	43
Figure 7:	LNOB transformative continuum	49
Figure 8:	Engagement of rights holders in the evaluation process	51
Figure 9:	Familiarity with the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan across regional and country-level staff	62
Figure 10:	Conducting LNOB assessments	73
Figure 11:	LNOB across different output areas	73
Figure 12:	Survey respondents' views on external barriers	83
Figure 13:	Engagement with user-led civil society	87
Figure 14:	UNFPA data contribution to the broader system	107
Figure 15:	UNFPA diversity, equity and inclusion webpage	123
Figure 16:	Staff perceptions of equal treatment across identity characteristics	128
Figure 17:	UNFPA capacity to monitor, document, and communicate UNFPA's LNOB work	131

Boxes

Box 1:	Addendum - The evolving global landscape and its implications for this evaluation	25
Box 2:	Meaningful engagement of rights holders within this evaluation	50
Box 3:	Good practice - Applying the LNOB Operational Plan in humanitarian settings – Afghanistan and Whole of Syria	64
Box 4:	Good practice - Advancing intersectional targeting in West and Central Africa	74
Box 5:	Good Practice - Youth-led engagement in Malawi	90
Box 6:	Reaching the Furthest Behind - Adaptive humanitarian action in Pakistan	94
Box 7:	Good Practice - Advancing LNOB through mobile health clinics in North Macedonia	97
Box 8:	Good Practice - Strengthening LNOB data in Latin America and the Caribbean	110
Box 9:	Good practice - Promoting workforce diversity and inclusive culture in Türkiye	124

Annexes (Available in Volume II of the report)

Annex 1:	Evaluation matrix
Annex 2:	Data collection tools
Annex 3:	Steering Committee engagement
Annex 4:	Online survey
Annex 5:	Feminist principles in evaluation – Lessons learned
Annex 6:	List of positions consulted
Annex 7:	Stakeholder mapping
Annex 8:	Inception Report
Annex 9:	Bibliography
Annex 10:	Terms of Reference

Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to affected populations	LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual and other gender diverse people
AoI	Areas of inquiry	LNOB	Leaving no one behind
APRO	Asia Pacific Regional Office	OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
COD-PS	Common Operational Datasets – Population Statistics	OECD-DAC	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/ Development Assistance Committee
CSO	Civil society organization	RFB	Reaching the furthest behind
CVA	Cash and voucher assistance	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
EECARO	Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office	SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
ESA	East and Southern Africa	SWEDD	The West and Central Africa Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend
FGD	Focus group discussion	UMIC	Upper middle-income country
GBV	Gender-based violence	UNCT	United Nations Country Team
GBV AoR	Gender-based violence area of responsibility	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
HDP	Humanitarian-Development-Peace	UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
HRBA	Human rights-based approaches	UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
HRD	Humanitarian Response Division	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee	UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development	WFP	World Food Programme
IRRF	Integrated Results and Resources Framework		
KII	Key informant interview		
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean		
LACRO	Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office		

Glossary

The glossary offers descriptions of key terms used throughout the report drawing on definitions from UNFPA frameworks.¹

Leaving no one behind (LNOB) includes all people excluded from progress, including those impacted due to their gender alone. This includes those “who get left behind when they lack choices and opportunities to participate in and benefit from development progress”.

Gender Plus (Gender+) refers to the overlapping, intersecting factors in addition to gender that harm, exclude and disadvantage populations, leaving them furthest behind.

Reaching the furthest behind (RFB) is focused on reaching those in situations where gender and other exclusionary factor(s) work together to create the disadvantage.²

RFB factors are characteristics that drive discrimination and inequality and may intersect with various other drivers of exclusion in the same person or group. As outlined in the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan the following are core ‘furthest behind’ factors and characteristics often associated with discrimination and exclusion: age; culture, ethnicity, race, language, or religion; disability; HIV status; migration, asylum or displacement; sexual orientation or gender identity; income or wealth.

Gender equality means that the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally and that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Equality between women and men is seen as both a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development.

¹ UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025. UNFPA (2019). UNFPA Gender and Equality Strategy 2018-2021.

² The shift in thinking stems from the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan, which outlines: “For UNFPA, reaching the furthest behind is a key element to strengthen in our work during the 2022-2025 period. In this, UNFPA will refer to ‘reaching the furthest behind’ and not the more commonly used ‘reaching the furthest behind first’. For UNFPA, the fact that we are almost wholly focused on one LNOB factor (gender) means that our core work needs to be prioritized simultaneously with additional efforts on reaching the furthest behind.”

Gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, and a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally.

Women's empowerment implies women taking control of their lives and is both a process and an outcome. UNFPA defines women's empowerment through five components: women's sense of dignity; their right to have and determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order.

Executive summary

Background

“Leaving no one behind” (LNOB) is a central commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasizing the need to “reach the furthest behind first” as essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In alignment with these global commitments, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has positioned the principles of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind (RFB) at the core of its strategic framework and transformative goals.

To support this commitment, UNFPA applies a human rights-based approach across all programmes and operations, ensuring attention to those most at risk of exclusion. LNOB principles have been progressively integrated into UNFPA’s key strategic documents, including the current Strategic Plan 2022–2025, which identifies LNOB and RFB as foundational to achieving the three transformative results.

To operationalize this approach, UNFPA developed the ‘UNFPA Strategic Plan on Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind 2022–2025’ (the LNOB Operational Plan), which outlines a structured framework for addressing the drivers of exclusion across eight domains: (i) leadership; (ii) identification, prioritization and planning; (iii) financial resources; (iv) capacity development; (v) tracking, monitoring and evaluation; (vi) data and knowledge; (vii) communication; and (viii) partnerships.



Purpose and scope of evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is to generate evidence to enhance UNFPA support for the implementation of the principle of LNOB.

The specific objectives are to:

- (i) assess the conceptualization, integration, implementation and monitoring of LNOB principles across UNFPA's work;
- (ii) capture good practices and lessons learned;
- (iii) provide actionable inputs to inform the current Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and next Strategic Plan 2026-2029; and
- (iv) ensure meaningful engagement of rights holders throughout the evaluation process.

The evaluation covers the period from 2018 to 2024 and assesses the integration of LNOB into UNFPA's programming and operations at global, regional and country levels. It covers all thematic areas of UNFPA programming, in both development and humanitarian settings.

Primary intended users include the UNFPA Executive Board, senior management and staff at all levels, with additional users expected to include civil society organization partners, donors, non-governmental organizations, and other United Nations agencies.



© UNFPA Palestine/Bisan Owda

Methodology

The evaluation applied a feminist, formative and utilization-focused approach, guided by a constructed theory of change and transformative framework specifically developed for this exercise. A mixed-methods design was used for data collection and analysis, combining both qualitative and quantitative sources.

Methods included a comprehensive document review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGD) and an online survey. In-depth insights were generated through a series of case studies: country case studies (in Malawi, Pakistan and Türkiye); an in-depth regional case study (in Latin America and the Caribbean); and thematic case studies (LNOB in humanitarian and Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) continuum settings; and LNOB in upper middle-income and low-fertility contexts).

The evaluation integrated ethical considerations including informed consent and applying a gender equality and human rights lens throughout the evaluation processes and phases. A key innovation was the participatory governance structure established through a Steering Committee formed at the outset of the evaluation. The Steering Committee included representatives with experiences of exclusion and discrimination – such as indigenous peoples, refugees and persons with disabilities – and played an active role in shaping the evaluation design, validating emerging findings and ensuring inclusive oversight.

Main findings

Understanding and uptake of the LNOB Operational Plan

The principle of leaving no one behind is widely understood and strongly supported across UNFPA, with many staff considering it central to the organization's mandate. Its designation as a strategic accelerator in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022–2025 has reinforced broad alignment around the concept. While awareness of the specific LNOB Operational Plan varies, its core concepts – in particular its emphasis on factor-based and intersectional approaches – are widely endorsed. Continued efforts to clarify the linkages between the LNOB Operational Plan and related concepts (for example, a human rights-based approach) would help strengthen its practical application and coherence across all levels of the organization.

Strengths and challenges in LNOB implementation

The principles of leaving no one behind are well integrated across UNFPA programming and are broadly recognized as central to achieving UNFPA's three transformative results. In upper and middle-income countries, the value of LNOB is particularly clear, with its focus on addressing persistent exclusion and inequality. In humanitarian context or settings, where high needs in maternal mortality and gender-based violence affect broad segments of the population, the principle of LNOB remains equally critical, although its practical application is more complex.

UNFPA has implemented a range of LNOB-responsive interventions and, in some instances, LNOB transformative programming that addresses structural drivers of exclusion. These efforts are often grounded in practical, context-specific strategies that can lay the foundation for longer-term systemic change. While application of the LNOB Operational Plan varies across the organization, there are opportunities to strengthen its systematic use through more consistent guidance and enhanced institutional accountability.

UNFPA's partnerships with civil society are a notable strength, although extent of engagement varies. Localization was highlighted across case studies as a promising avenue for advancing LNOB, particularly through support to civil society organizations that represent and are led by marginalized groups. However, realizing the full potential of this approach may require greater flexibility in institutional funding and accountability frameworks.

Several external barriers hinder the implementation of LNOB principles, including shrinking civic space, political sensitivities and data limitations. Despite these challenges, the evaluation noted that UNFPA has made important progress in advancing LNOB principles, with opportunities to further strengthen implementation through clearer guidance, enhanced partnerships and sustained investment in transformative approaches.

LNOB in humanitarian settings

UNFPA demonstrates a clear and ongoing commitment to identifying both persistent and emerging vulnerabilities within humanitarian contexts. However, translating these efforts into programming that fully addresses the intersectional needs of those furthest behind remains a challenge, especially in complex and rapidly evolving emergency settings.

UNFPA has implemented a range of LNOB-aligned interventions in humanitarian contexts, including mobile clinics, cash and voucher assistance and the distribution of dignity kits, which have contributed to improving access for affected populations. In these settings, localization emerges as a key enabler for reaching those furthest behind, particularly where humanitarian access is constrained. However, the extent and depth of localization vary across contexts, and further strengthening of partnerships with local and user-led organizations is needed to ensure more consistent, inclusive and sustainable LNOB outcomes.

The operational and contextual constraints of humanitarian response require approaches that are not yet fully reflected in the current LNOB Operational Plan. The Plan would benefit from guidance specific to humanitarian contexts, including on life-saving prioritizations, formalized responsibilities and alignment with humanitarian coordination frameworks.

Data limitations remain a cross-cutting constraint, with inconsistent availability and reliability of disaggregated data across humanitarian responses. UNFPA is well positioned to strengthen its role in addressing these gaps. In addition, further integrating LNOB principles across the HDP continuum represents an important opportunity for enhancing coherence and impact in crisis-affected contexts.

Coherence and comparative advantage within the United Nations system

At the inter-agency level, differences in how United Nations entities interpret and operationalize LNOB through their respective mandates pose challenges to establishing a shared understanding of who is being left behind. Despite this, UNFPA contributes clear added value to joint efforts – particularly through its focus on gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and population data.

There is broad recognition of UNFPA's potential to further leverage its comparative advantage in data systems to strengthen LNOB implementation. Many respondents emphasized the need for continued investment in disaggregated data as a foundation for equitable programming and evidence-based decision-making.

UNFPA's normative work was also identified as a key strength in advancing LNOB. The organization plays an important convening role – linking upstream policy advocacy with downstream programming, supporting civil society participation and defending civic space. Across several regions, examples of good practice were identified in combining targeted and mainstreamed approaches. While normative engagement on some sensitive LNOB-related issues remains challenging, UNFPA's upstream work is widely viewed as a strategic entry point for enabling transformative and inclusive change.

Enabling resources, systems and institutional capacity

UNFPA's early investment in the LNOB Operational Plan laid a strong foundation for institutionalizing the LNOB agenda. However, current resource allocation does not fully reflect the strategic commitment to LNOB, and implementation remains uneven across levels.

Progress on diversity, equity and inclusion is evident at the global level, offering a platform for further roll-out and deeper engagement at the regional and country levels. Staff across the organization emphasized the importance of clarifying core values and strengthening internal alignment to support consistent application of a human rights-based approach.

Challenges also remain in tracking LNOB-related results. Current monitoring systems are

better equipped to capture output-level data than outcome-level or qualitative dimensions of transformative change. Additionally, while financial controls are important for ensuring accountability, they may limit UNFPA's ability to fund small, grassroots, user-led organizations – hindering progress on localization and transformative programming. These constraints are not unique to UNFPA but reflect broader systemic challenges across the United Nations development system.

© UNFPA Peru/Polo Santos



Conclusions

1.

UNFPA has taken meaningful steps to integrate the principle of LNOB across its strategic, programmatic and operational work, with growing evidence of internalization at country and regional levels. However, sustaining this momentum will require strengthened institutional ownership, clearly defined roles and robust accountability mechanisms across the organization.

2.

UNFPA's advancement of LNOB is supported by a forward-looking strategic framework that provides a strong foundation for driving the agenda forward. However, realizing the full potential of LNOB within the organization will require more consistent and improved resource allocation to support its effective implementation, as well as a clearer approach to workforce diversity and values clarification to foster an inclusive and enabling internal environment.

3.

UNFPA adds unique value in advancing LNOB through two key areas: its convening role, which enables the furthest behind to be heard at the highest levels; and its role in generating and supporting the use of population data, which enhances the visibility and inclusion of those at risk of being left behind.

4.

LNOB implementation across various contexts presents both opportunities and challenges, with UNFPA's strong collaboration with civil society emerging as a key strength. To ensure LNOB remains relevant, UNFPA must evolve and adapt to varying needs, particularly in high-need and humanitarian settings, empowering communities and shifting power dynamics towards solutions that are locally led.

5.

The integration of LNOB principles is inherent in UNFPA's work, primarily through responsive programming. While this approach is effective, it does not always foster transformative change, which requires longer-term, user-led and partnership-driven efforts.

6.

The LNOB Operational Plan is an important positive step for UNFPA, promoting inclusion and empowerment, but UNFPA needs clearer guidance on the additional focus on factors and stronger integration with human rights-based approaches to fully address structural inequalities.

Recommendations

1.

UNFPA should strengthen institutional accountability to LNOB by embedding it across corporate systems, roles and decision-making processes – ensuring it is prioritized as a core accelerator and enabler of its Strategic Plan and the achievement of UNFPA's transformative results.

2.

UNFPA should seek to enhance diversity and embed LNOB values within its own staffing structures and human resource practices to ensure greater alignment with its organizational goals of inclusion and human rights.

3.

UNFPA should enhance internal integration of LNOB throughout all of its policies and external communications to ensure a clear, consistent and cohesive approach to LNOB.

4.

UNFPA should develop a series of programmatic issue papers that are practical, short and informative as part of an internal LNOB learning series.

5.

UNFPA should build on its existing partnership strategy by identifying specific actions to leverage each partnership type more effectively in advancing LNOB. This should involve aligning actions with principles of inclusion, intersectionality and human rights. Key considerations include: (a) addressing the shrinking civil space; (b) harnessing UNFPA's strong convening power; and (c) recognizing the critical role of partnerships in driving transformative social norm change. These aspects should guide the operationalization of a feminist, LNOB-focused partnership approach, building on the existing strategy as a framework for action.

6.

UNFPA should revisit the LNOB Operational Plan to clarify the conceptual linkages, framing LNOB as a means to achieve broader objectives – particularly the transformative results and the Sustainable Development Goals – rather than being an end in itself. Following this, UNFPA should develop a clear dissemination plan for understanding key concepts of LNOB, and strengthen its knowledge management to capture best practices, tools and strategies.

01

Introduction

The principles of leaving no one behind (LNOB) and reaching the furthest behind (RFB) are central to the achievement of both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and the transformative goals (ending unmet need for family planning, ending preventable maternal deaths, and ending gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful practices, including female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage) of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). UNFPA has made concerted efforts to integrate and adapt the LNOB principles in its programming to date, with early lessons learned on areas to strengthen. In 2019, a mid-term review of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021 reported limited progress on the outputs focused on furthest-behind populations. In 2020, a follow-up assessment³ of the implementation of the LNOB principles found limitations in the evidence-based implementation and systematization of efforts for documenting, evaluating and sharing good practices for reaching those left furthest behind and the hardest-to-reach populations.

In response to this at a global level, the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025⁴ reflects a deepened commitment to the LNOB and RFB principles applied across a range of UNFPA-identified ‘furthest behind’ factors and characteristics often associated with discrimination and exclusion, which include: age; culture, ethnicity, race, language, or religion; disability; HIV status; migration, asylum, or displacement; sexual orientation or gender identity; income or wealth. LNOB is one of the identified six accelerators in the Strategic Plan that can fast-track progress towards the three transformative goals. The ‘UNFPA Strategic Plan on Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind 2022-2025’⁵ – hereafter referred to as the LNOB Operational Plan – accompanies the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and provides a roadmap for the actions needed to reach the furthest behind. At a regional level, UNFPA developed the ‘Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) Regional Strategy: Leave No One Behind (LNOB) Accelerate the Promise’ in 2019, with a focus on the most excluded population groups, including people of African descent, indigenous communities and persons with disabilities.

³ UNFPA (2020). Assessment of UNFPA performance in addressing the principle of Leaving no one Behind as part of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021.

⁴ UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

⁵ UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

Against this background, UNFPA has commissioned a formative evaluation to generate evidence on how LNOB and RFB approaches are being implemented in all areas and all levels of UNFPA's work. As such, the object of this evaluation (the evaluand) is the integration of LNOB and RFB approaches and principles across UNFPA programmatic and operational work. LNOB at UNFPA is not a specific programme, nor does it have a specific budget or expenditure that is accurately tracked. UNFPA's LNOB and RFB approaches are primarily funded through existing resources, and secondarily through unearmarked funds for long-term plans and interventions. UNFPA's LNOB and RFB approaches cover all regions and countries in which UNFPA operates and are conducted under the guidance of the LNOB Operational Plan,⁶ which was in its final year of implementation at the time of this evaluation. The approaches are delivered by: UNFPA focal persons at global, regional and country levels in partnership with communities and persons who identify with left-behind factors; other United Nations agencies, programmes and funds; global partnerships and networks; government ministries and departments; civil society; and donors.

This is the first evaluation focusing on UNFPA support for the integration of the principles of LNOB and RFB. It is of strategic importance to UNFPA, given that the principles of LNOB are central to the achievement of UNFPA's three transformative results, and thereby the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 and 5, being good health and well-being, and gender equality.⁷ The evaluation findings are intended to inform decision-making for the forthcoming UNFPA Strategic Plan 2026-2029 and to improve the implementation of existing UNFPA interventions. The evaluation is expected to be used primarily by UNFPA's Executive Board, senior management and other key stakeholders, including UNFPA staff in regional and country offices.⁸

The purpose of the evaluation is to generate real-time evidence on how LNOB and RFB approaches are being implemented in all areas and at all levels of UNFPA's work by assessing progress and learnings to promote accountability and evidence-informed decision-making. This evaluation assesses UNFPA's approach and capacity to

⁶ UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

⁷ SDG 3 good health and well-being: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. UNFPA efforts link specifically to target 3.1, reduce maternal mortality; and target 3.7 universal access to sexual and reproductive care, family planning and education. SDG 5 gender equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. UNFPA efforts link specifically target 5.2, end all violence against and exploitation of women and girls; target 5.3 eliminate forced marriages and genital mutilation; and target 5.6 universal access to reproductive health and rights.

⁸ UNFPA (2024). Terms of reference for the formative evaluation of UNFPA support to the integration of the principles of 'leave no one behind' and 'reaching the furthest behind'.

implement the principle of LNOB over the UNFPA Strategic Plan periods of 2018-2021 and 2022-2025. It assesses explicitly UNFPA's performance on LNOB from 2018 to 2024 across all areas of its work at the global, regional and country levels and allows for course correction on the current implementation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and learnings on what works, what does not, for whom and under what circumstances and why. The evaluation is also expected to empower communities and national and regional stakeholders, and advance the meaningful engagement of persons who represent UNFPA-identified furthest-behind factors in the evaluation process.

The evaluation has the following specific objectives, which are in line with the evaluation terms of reference:

1. Assess the **conceptualization, integration, implementation and monitoring** of the principle of LNOB across all areas and levels of UNFPA's work;
2. Facilitate **learning, capture good practices and generate knowledge** from UNFPA's experience in efforts to integrate and implement the LNOB principles, including on what is working and not working, why and under what circumstances;
3. Provide **actionable inputs for the implementation** of the current UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025,⁹ inform the upcoming Latin America and Caribbean Regional Programme¹⁰ and the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2026-2029, and improve UNFPA contributions to the 2030 Agenda;
4. Integrate **practical and innovative ways** to engage persons who represent UNFPA-identified furthest-behind factors in various roles throughout the evaluation.

The scope of the evaluation is multidimensional and articulated through the three aspects of temporal, geographical and thematic scope. Each aspect is in line with the ambition of the evaluation terms of reference.

- a. **Temporal:** The evaluation covers the time period 2018-2024 and covers two strategic plan periods (UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021 and UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025).

⁹ UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

¹⁰ Since 2019, the LAC region has implemented a LNOB Regional Strategy and developed an extensive portfolio of work addressing issues related to people of African descent, indigenous people, and persons with disabilities. The Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO) had planned to evaluate this strategy alongside the global evaluation. To leverage potential synergies between the two evaluations and optimize resources, it was more effective to include an in-depth case study on LACRO and its LNOB Operational Plan within the global evaluation rather than conducting two separate exercises.

- b. Geographical:** This is a global evaluation that covers all six of UNFPA's regions, with a balance of breadth and depth of analysis through data collection at global, regional and country levels across a range of contexts. Considerations for countries and regions selected for case studies cater for geographical diversity across all three of UNFPA's tiers of classification.¹¹ However, in-depth case studies have not been collected from every country and region in line with the purposive sampling strategy explained in the methodology section (Section 3.3.4). The countries and regions included are: Latin America and the Caribbean (Panama, Costa Rica and Peru); Malawi; Pakistan; Türkiye; Arab States and West and Central Africa (humanitarian and Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) continuum contexts); and Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia (middle-income and low-fertility settings).
- c. Thematic:** The evaluation covers all thematic areas across UNFPA including programme areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender and human rights, and population and development, as well as operational aspects of UNFPA's work. It covers the respective approaches with LNOB as one of the six accelerators, including the strategic investment areas of policy and accountability; quality of care and services; gender and social norms; population change and data; humanitarian action; and adolescents and youth. It does not evaluate any financial data related to LNOB programming as it was not possible to access these data in UNFPA's new financial system (QuantumPlus).

Evaluation stakeholders and audience

There are multiple levels of key stakeholders and intended users of this evaluation. Firstly, communities and persons who identify with left-behind factors are the most important stakeholders, and their engagement is prioritized throughout the evaluation process (see the methodology section). Primary intended users include the Executive Board, UNFPA senior management, and UNFPA programmatic and operational colleagues at global, regional, and country levels. Further users are expected to be civil society organization (CSO) partners of UNFPA, donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other United Nations agencies. A full stakeholder mapping and analysis of key stakeholders and intended users of the evaluation is presented in Annex VII.

¹¹ UNFPA (2021). Strategic Plan, 2022-2025. Annex 3. Business model. <https://www.unfpa.org/unfpa-strategic-plan-2022-2025-dpfpa20218>.

02

Context

2.1 Global context of LNOB

Box 1: Addendum - The evolving global landscape and its implications for this evaluation

This addendum acknowledges that the data collection and analysis for this evaluation were conducted before the significant financial and geopolitical shifts that began in early 2025. These shifts have fundamentally reshaped the global development landscape and affected the delivery of humanitarian and development assistance. These changes have exacerbated vulnerabilities among already marginalized populations, in particular, women and girls – core priority groups for UNFPA's work. While the evaluation's findings remain broadly valid and provide a sound basis for decision-making, they should be interpreted in the context of an evolving global landscape. UNFPA will draw on these findings, together with current data, to ensure its strategies remain adaptive, responsive and aligned with the needs of those at most risk of being left behind.

Global trends and setbacks in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) progress

Operationalizing the principles of LNOB and RFB has never been more critical. In 2020, the United Nations Economist Network highlighted inequality as one of the five “megatrends” in sustainable development, along with climate change, demographic shifts (for example, ageing and international migration), urbanization and digital technologies.¹² That same year, the Secretary-General called for a “new social contract” that creates equal opportunities and respects the rights and freedoms of all.¹³ However, recent reports demonstrate that conflict, climate change and health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have ‘derailed’ progress towards the Sustainable

12 United Nations (2020). Report of the UN Economist Network for the UN 75th Anniversary: Shaping the Trends of Our Time. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/09/20-124-UNEN-75Report-2-1.pdf>.

13 United Nations (2020). Secretary-General's Nelson Mandela Lecture: “Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era”. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-07-18/secretary-generals-nelson-mandela-lecture-%E2%80%9Ctackling-the-inequality-pandemic-new-social-contract-for-new-era%E2%80%9D-delivered>.

Development Goals, leaving behind the most marginalized populations. In 2023, over half of the Sustainable Development Goals' targets were demonstrating weak or insufficient progress towards being achieved by 2030; and 30 per cent of targets had stalled or reversed in progress. Recent crises have exposed inequalities in coping and resilience, and "deepened divides across various dimensions of well-being".¹⁴ Reduction in global income inequality has now reversed, disproportionately affecting vulnerable and marginalized populations including women and girls, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, and indigenous peoples.¹⁵

Demographic shifts: opportunities and challenges

There is a complex relationship between and within global megatrends, with some equalizing opportunity, while concurrently adding to the disadvantage experienced between and within countries. Starting with demographic shifts, fertility rates continue to decline, and life expectancy continues to rise globally. These changes affect all countries but have disproportionate impacts on marginalized people, who are often excluded from health and social care systems.¹⁶ Since the 1980s, low fertility has become a global phenomenon, with two thirds of the global population now living in countries with declining fertility rates.¹⁷ In addressing the drivers of low fertility, many governments have started implementing policies aimed at supporting the health and well-being of families and the successful development of children. However, other governments have turned to regressive family policies to stimulate birth rates, with pronatalism spreading globally. Such responses bring significant implications for SRHR, including for women's freedom, bodily autonomy and agency.¹⁸

Population ageing is also a global phenomenon, with the share of the global population aged 65 years or above projected to rise from 10 per cent in 2022 to 16 per cent in 2050.¹⁹ While the aging population is a global challenge, its impact is most acutely felt by older women, rural communities and persons with disabilities, who often have less access to health services and protections.²⁰ The older population is growing rapidly in regions such as East and South Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, including in countries with large youth populations.²¹ While increasing longevity is a manifestation of the progress achieved in human development and health over the last decades, the rapid demographic shift has also shed light on the lack of adequate protection

14 United Nations (2023). The Sustainable Development Goals Report Special edition. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>.

15 Ibid.

16 UNFPA, "State of World Population 2022: Seeing the Unseen: The Case for Action in the Neglected Crisis of Adolescent Mental Health."

17 UNFPA (2024). ICPD30 Brief. Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future. Demographic Change and Sustainability.

18 Ibid.

19 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects: Summary of Results.

20 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), "World Population Ageing 2023" https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2024_wpa2023-report.pdf.

21 UNFPA (2024). Ageing. <https://www.unfpa.org/ageing#readmore-expand>.

mechanisms and on the existing gaps in policies and programmes to address the needs of older persons, in all their diversity.²²

The principle of LNOB requires that health and social care systems are adapted to the diverse needs of women and youth across their life course, in line with these demographic changes, to ensure that no one is left behind. For example, comprehensive sexuality education may need to be upscaled in countries with a younger population; there will be increased demand for infertility and assisted reproduction treatments and surrogacy as women start families later in life; and in ageing populations, sexual and reproductive health services must be better prepared to meet the needs of older women, including support through menopause and treatment of reproductive cancers.²³ Furthermore, women still perform 3.2 times more unpaid care work than men for children, persons with disabilities and older family members. Efforts to address gender inequality will not progress and women will continue to be disadvantaged without substantial strengthening of the care economy.²⁴

Displacement, climate change and vulnerability

Globally, there has been an overall increase in displacement due to increasingly complex and protracted conflicts and exacerbated by other megatrends such as climate change, emerging and frontier technologies, increasing inequality and urbanization.²⁵ While international migration brings with it opportunities for demographic diversity, some migrant groups and refugees will experience discrimination and continue to be left out of sustainable development, particularly in countries that have not adapted their legal frameworks to support the most vulnerable.²⁶ The climate crisis threatens access to safe water, food and education, and worsens health vulnerabilities, disproportionately affecting those already facing social and economic disadvantages, with women, adolescent girls and older persons at particular risk. Concurrently, those groups excluded from claiming their sexual and reproductive rights will have less resilience to climate-induced disasters, adding further to inequality.²⁷

Digital divide and access to SRHR services

Emerging and frontier technologies offer the potential to extend the reach of sexual and reproductive healthcare, especially for those who live in rural or remote locations,

22 OHCHR (n.d.). OHCHR and older persons. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/older-persons>.

23 UNFPA (2024). ICPD30 Brief. Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future. The Future of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

24 UNFPA (2024). ICPD30 Brief. Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future. Demographic Change and Sustainability.

25 United Nations (2020). Report of the UN Economist Network for the UN 75th Anniversary Shaping the Trends of Our Time. <http://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/10/20-124-UNEN-75Report-ExecSumm-EN-REVISED.pdf>.

26 UNFPA (2024). ICPD30 Brief. Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future. Demographic Change and Sustainability.

27 UNFPA (2024). ICPD30 Brief. Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future. ICPD and Climate Action.



among mobile populations, and for persons with disabilities.²⁸ However, the digital divide presents a challenge, as not all populations have equal access to digital resources. Marginalized groups – such as women and girls, older adults, people in lower-income and rural communities – face significant barriers to digital access, digital literacy and safe usage of sexual and reproductive health technologies.²⁹ Digital inclusion is a critical component to ensure SRHR for all, especially for those who are most at risk of being left behind in both digital and health spaces.

Challenges to human rights and gender equality

Finally, it is important to note that there is a regression in both the recognition and the realization of human rights globally, particularly for women, and groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other (LGBTQIA+) marginalized communities. In 2024, 13 countries demonstrated a negative trend in the ability of women to exercise decision-making over their own sexual and reproductive health.³⁰ In some regions and countries, conservative positions are rising and gaining influence, presenting added challenges to the advancement of gender equality and SRHR for different groups, particularly for members of the LGBTQIA+ community, potentially excluding these communities and other vulnerable populations from essential rights and services.³¹

2.2 LNOB and global commitments

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) sets forth the global commitments to LNOB, explicitly referencing the need to “reach the furthest behind first”.³² The principles of LNOB and RFB are essential to the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals. Of particular relevance, this evaluation considers how UNFPA’s LNOB approach advances commitments and contributes to targets and indicators for SDG 3: ‘Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’; SDG 5: ‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’; SDG 10: ‘Reduce

²⁸ UNFPA (2024). ICPD30 Brief. Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future. The Future of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

²⁹ UNFPA (2024). ICPD30 Brief. Navigating Megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a Sustainable Future. A Safe Digital Future.

³⁰ UNFPA (2024). Interwoven Lives, Threads of Hope: Ending Inequalities in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. State of the World Population 2024.

³¹ UNFPA (2017). Strategic Plan 2018-2021. Annex 6 Global and regional interventions.

³² United Nations (2015). Transforming our World: the 2030 Sustainable Agenda for Development.

inequality within and among countries'; and SDG 16: 'Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'. The evaluation provides qualitative information about the implementation and monitoring of the principle of LNOB across all areas and levels of UNFPA's work, thus providing qualitative evidence relating to relevant Sustainable Development Goal indicators.³³

This evaluation will also contribute to UNFPA's progress towards the three transformative results and benchmarks in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD25). Ending the unmet need for family planning; ending preventable maternal death; and ending gender-based violence (GBV) and all harmful practices, will only be achieved if the principles of LNOB and RFB are effectively implemented across all areas and levels of UNFPA's work.³⁴ Furthermore, benchmarks relating to: universal access to sexual and reproductive health as a part of universal health coverage; financing to finish the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and sustain gains already made; harnessing demographic diversity for economic growth and sustainable development; addressing gender-based violence and harmful practices; and ensuring sexual and reproductive healthcare in humanitarian and fragile contexts³⁵ all call for greater learning and knowledge generation on the factors driving inequalities and effective strategies to address these drivers.

2.3 UNFPA integration of LNOB principles

2.3.1 Strategic frameworks shaping UNFPA support

The principles of LNOB and RFB are central to UNFPA's strategic framework and the achievement of UNFPA's transformative goals. Building on these global commitments, UNFPA has adopted a human rights-based approach (HRBA) for all programmes and operations, to ensure that no one is left behind. This has translated to the integration of the principle of leaving no one behind in several of UNFPA key strategic documents and guidance, including:

- UNFPA Strategic Plan 2014-2017, which called for a focus on "the most vulnerable and marginalized" women, adolescents and youth.³⁶

33 SDG 3 (health and well-being): Target 3.1: Reduce the global maternal mortality ratio; Target 3.7: Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services. Indicator: Maternal mortality ratio, and the proportion of women of reproductive age who have their need for family planning satisfied. SDG 5 (gender equality): Target 5.3: Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation. Indicator: Percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married or in a union before age 18. SDG 10 (reduced inequalities): Target 10.2: Empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all. Indicator: Proportion of people living below 50 per cent of median income. SDG 16 (peace and security) Target 16.1 (Reduce violence): Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere. Indicator: proportion of people who have experienced physical or sexual violence.

34 UNFPA (2019). Nairobi Statement on ICPD25: Accelerating the Promise.

35 Ibid.

36 UNFPA (2014). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2014-2017.

- UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021, which referenced the “prioritization of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first”.³⁷
- The Guidance Note for Applying a Human Rights-Based Approach to Programming in UNFPA (2020), which makes explicit links to LNOB efforts.³⁸
- UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, a discussion of which follows.

The current UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 is focused on ensuring that no one is left behind and it emphasizes the protection and promotion of human rights of those left behind. It makes explicit references to LNOB and targeting the furthest behind first in achieving the results, considering the factors and characteristics often associated with discrimination and exclusion. Within the theory of change of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, accelerators have been identified to achieve the six interconnected outputs, whereby the concepts of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first comprise one standalone accelerator. Further, those that are furthest behind are explicitly referenced now under all three outcomes of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025.³⁹

As a complement to the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, the UNFPA Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025⁴⁰ (hereafter referred to as the ‘LNOB Operational Plan’) was launched. The LNOB Operational Plan sets forth the vision that “those furthest behind enjoy sexual and reproductive health and rights as UNFPA explicitly prioritizes addressing intersectional, persistent, and extreme disadvantages, discrimination and disempowerment”.⁴¹ It includes a detailed action plan covering the eight key domains of: i) leadership; ii) identification, prioritization and planning; iii) financial resources; iv) capacity development; v) tracking, monitoring and evaluating; vi) data and knowledge; vii) communication; and viii) partnerships. Specific actions across the three levels of the organization as well as for external stakeholders are defined for each domain and actions have been prioritized.⁴²

The LNOB Operational Plan emphasizes a focus on factors or characteristics that drive discrimination, exclusion and inequality. This focus on factors and underlying causes serves to complement the group-based lens by promoting a deeper, intersectional understanding of the multiple and overlapping disadvantages experienced by marginalized populations. By considering both the groups affected and the factors contributing to their marginalization, the LNOB Operational Plan supports more targeted, contextually grounded and inclusive programming.

37 UNFPA (2017). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021.

38 UNFPA (2020). Guidance Note for Applying a Human Rights-Based Approach to Programming in UNFPA.

39 UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

40 UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

41 UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

Page 9.

42 UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

The ‘Gender Plus Approach’, promoted by UNFPA, highlights gender as a key factor in addressing inequalities, while also considering intersecting factors – referred to as the ‘Plus’ – that impact people’s experiences and vulnerabilities. In addition to the foundational factor of gender, the eight global core furthest-behind factors identified in the LNOB Operational Plan are: age; culture, ethnicity, race, language and religion; disability; HIV/AIDS status; income or wealth; location; migration, asylum or displacement; and sexual orientation and gender identity. See Figure 1.

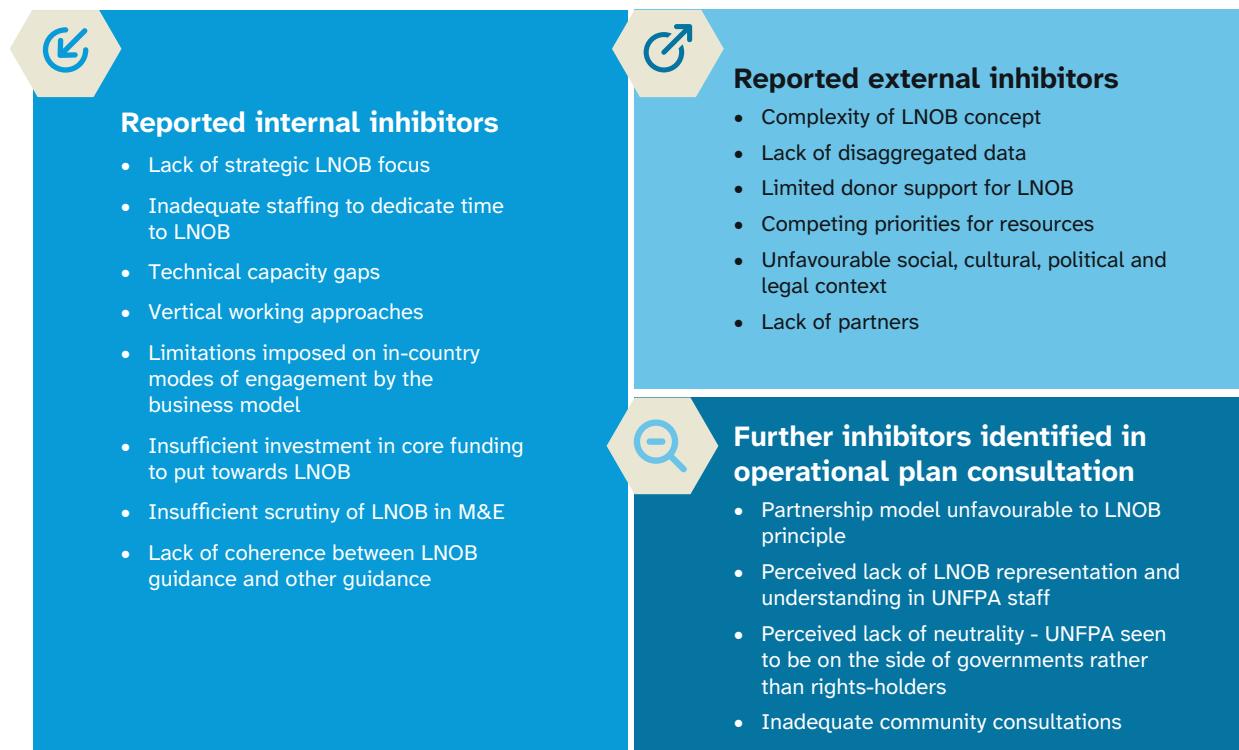
Figure 1: Gender Plus and furthest-behind factors⁴³



2.3.2 Key drivers and challenges that affect UNFPA's LNOB implementation

Commitments to LNOB in the current UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025⁴⁴ draw on lessons from implementing the previous UNFPA Strategic Plan to accelerate progress towards the three transformative results and therefore progress towards Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 5 in particular. Most notably, the mid-term review from 2020 found that UNFPA had made limited progress in Strategic Plan outputs focusing on furthest-behind populations, due to: (a) gaps in the availability of data and information about such populations; (b) inadequate financial resources and skills to reach those populations; and (c) resistance in recognizing some furthest-behind populations.⁴⁵ UNFPA undertook a more detailed assessment to understand how the principles of LNOB were being implemented and how operationalization could be improved.⁴⁶ Figure 2 shows key barriers identified by internal and external stakeholders through this assessment, noting that UNFPA has significant control over most internal inhibitors. While UNFPA has less control on external inhibitors, the organization can still work to mitigate the effects and advocate for change. Strengthening operational and practical guidance to build a common understanding of LNOB and RFB approaches within UNFPA was identified as an important area of improvement.

Figure 2: Identified internal and external barriers to LNOB and RFB



Source: UNFPA (2021). *Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025*. Page 5.

44 UNFPA (2021). Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

45 UNFPA (2020). Integrated midterm review and progress report on implementation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018-2021. Report of the Executive Director.

46 UNFPA (2020). Assessment of UNFPA Performance in Addressing the Principle of Leaving No One Behind as Part of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2018- 2021.

2.3.3 UNFPA's intersectional approach

The UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 also refers to the importance of intersectionality, defined as when dimensions of race, class and gender (among other factors) create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. The LNOB Operational Plan responds to this by focusing on transforming fundamentally unequal gender power structures to ensure that everyone, everywhere can exercise bodily autonomy, enjoy their rights and access opportunities free from discrimination, exclusion and violence, including harmful practices.⁴⁷

The LNOB Operational Plan calls for a human rights-based approach. This is done by engaging with human rights mechanisms, strengthening accountability in regulatory structures and systems, and supporting an enabling environment through non-discriminatory policies, laws and regulations. Other strategies include increasing the visibility of disadvantaged populations through disaggregated data and studies and putting in place targeted interventions.⁴⁸

In line with global concepts of LNOB,⁴⁹ UNFPA seeks to address root causes of exclusion and marginalization, including discrimination, stereotypes, social norms, stigma, xenophobia, racism and gender inequality. Taking an intersectional approach means identifying and addressing the multiple forms of discrimination – based on gender, race, sexuality, disability and class – that overlap and interact with one another to leave people behind in development efforts.⁵⁰ Strengthening the voice of, and partnerships with, civil society is also central to UNFPA's strategies to reach the furthest behind in its work. This includes supporting participatory mechanisms and advocacy on issues that affect those furthest behind, reinforcing principles of “nothing about us without us”.⁵¹



⁴⁷ UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ United Nations Sustainable Development Group (2022). Operationalizing Leaving No One Behind: Good Practice Note for UN Country Teams.

⁵⁰ UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind and Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

⁵¹ Ibid.

03

Methodology

3.1 Evaluation approach

The evaluation approach is grounded on an inclusive feminist, formative and transformative approach. It used a theory-based, mixed methods, participatory and utilization-focused design.

A feminist evaluation approach challenges traditional assessment frameworks by centring equity and power dynamics throughout the evaluation process. It prioritizes participatory methods that amplify diverse voices, particularly of those historically pushed behind, acknowledging intersectional factors of exclusion and discrimination.⁵²

The evaluation combines quantitative with qualitative data to capture nuanced experiences, but with greater emphasis on qualitative data, so the voices and subjectivities of diverse population groups, particularly those pushed behind, are weighed with more value than impersonal and aggregated quantitative data. It emphasizes critical reflection on evaluator positionality and biases to prevent perpetuating systemic inequities. Rather than simply measuring outcomes, feminist evaluations aim to be formative and examine how the different initiatives affect different groups and recommend actions to address structural inequalities. By incorporating context and complexity, this approach facilitates understanding of change in a contextualized manner.

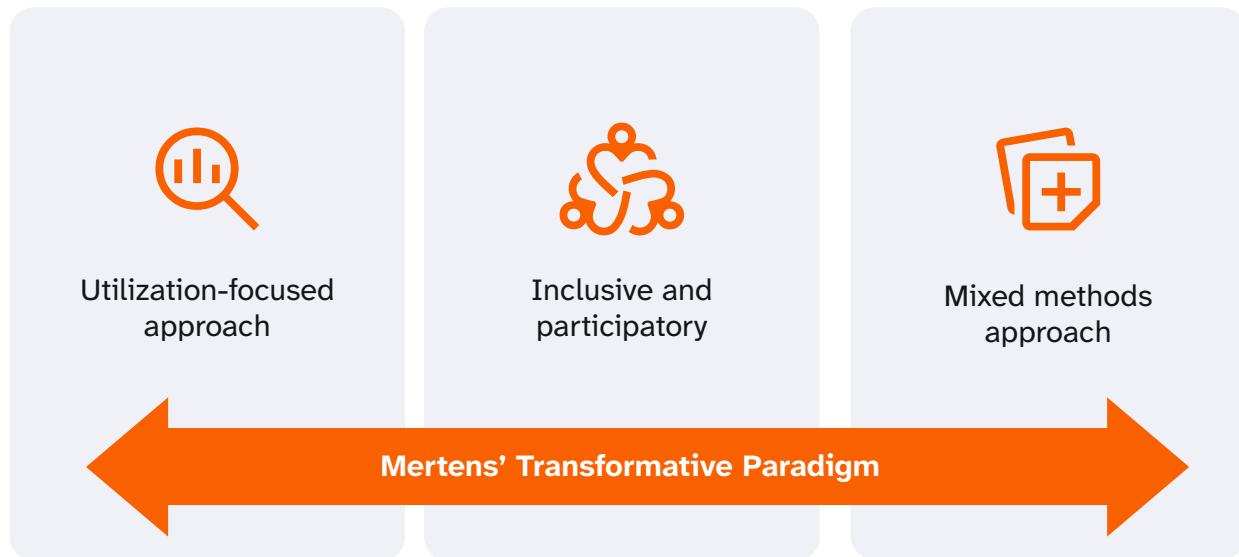
The evaluation used a transformative framework - as seen in Figure 3 - that guided the evaluation's commitment to social justice, equity and the empowerment of marginalized communities.⁵³ Further details on its application can be found in provided in Section 3.7 and detailed in Annex V in Volume II, while Annex III, Volume II provides an overview specifically of how the Steering Committee composed of individuals representing left behind factors contributed to amplifying diverse voices in this evaluation.

52 Section 3.7, below, presents a detailed overview of how feminist principles were integrated into the design in practice, and Annex III provides an overview specifically of how the Steering Committee contributed to amplifying diverse voices in this evaluation.

53 Mertens, D. M. 2009. *Transformative Research and Evaluation*. New York: Guilford Press.

Mertens, D.M., Hall, J., & Wilson, A.T. (2025). *Program evaluation theory and practice* (3rd ed.) NY: Guilford Press.

Figure 3: A feminist research framework



Source: Adapted from UNFPA IEO (2024). Presentation on leaving no one behind in the delivery of the UNFPA mission: Why we need more feminist evaluations.

3.2 Theory of change and evaluation matrix

At the time of the evaluation, no formal theory of change existed for the LNOB Operational Plan. To address this gap, the evaluation team developed a constructed theory of change specifically for the purposes of this evaluation. This theory of change served as the overarching analytical framework, guiding the design of the evaluation matrix, data collection and analysis.

Presented in Figure 4, the theory of change articulates the intended pathways of change by linking the operational inputs of the LNOB Operational Plan to its anticipated outcomes and long-term results. It illustrates how the plan is expected to contribute to UNFPA's three transformative results and how the evaluation questions align with these pathways.

The constructed theory of change outlines the following key components:

UNFPA's three transformative results: The top row of the theory of change illustrates the three transformative results of UNFPA, which the LNOB Operational Plan must either link to or support. These results form the ultimate goals that the LNOB Operational Plan aims to contribute toward.

Vision or objective of the LNOB Operational Plan: Directly below the top row, the theory of change outlines the vision or objective of the LNOB Operational Plan:

Ensuring that those furthest behind enjoy sexual and reproductive health and rights, with UNFPA explicitly prioritizing the intersectional, persistent, and extreme disadvantages, discrimination, and disempowerment faced by these populations.

Outcomes of the LNOB Operational Plan: The theory of change further breaks down into three broad outcome areas that the evaluation assesses: UNFPA programming and LNOB as an accelerator; UNFPA internalization; and UNFPA's broader contribution. These outcomes align with three of the four areas of inquiry (AoI) as suggested in the evaluation terms of reference:⁵⁴ AoI 2, operationalization of LNOB as a principle and its integration into UNFPA programming; AoI 3, LNOB as an accelerator; and AoI 4, institutional capacity to implement the LNOB principle. The terms of reference suggested AoI 1 is reflected in the bottom row of the theory of change (UNFPA conceptualization of LNOB).

Outputs and inputs of the LNOB Operational Plan: Below the outcome areas, the theory of change details the expected outputs of the LNOB Operational Plan, which logically connect to the defined outcomes. It also outlines the operational inputs required to achieve these outputs, including financial, human and technical resources, as well as foundational elements that define UNFPA's conceptualization of leaving no one behind.

Assumptions: At the bottom of the framework are light green boxes, highlighting the external assumptions and barriers to be tested and the internal barriers identified within UNFPA, respectively. These contextualize the evaluation within external and internal realities.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) criteria are mapped against the theory of change (purple dots of 1-5 in Figure 4). The evaluation questions that are aligned with these criteria are depicted in the evaluation matrix (Table 1 and Annex I, Volume II).

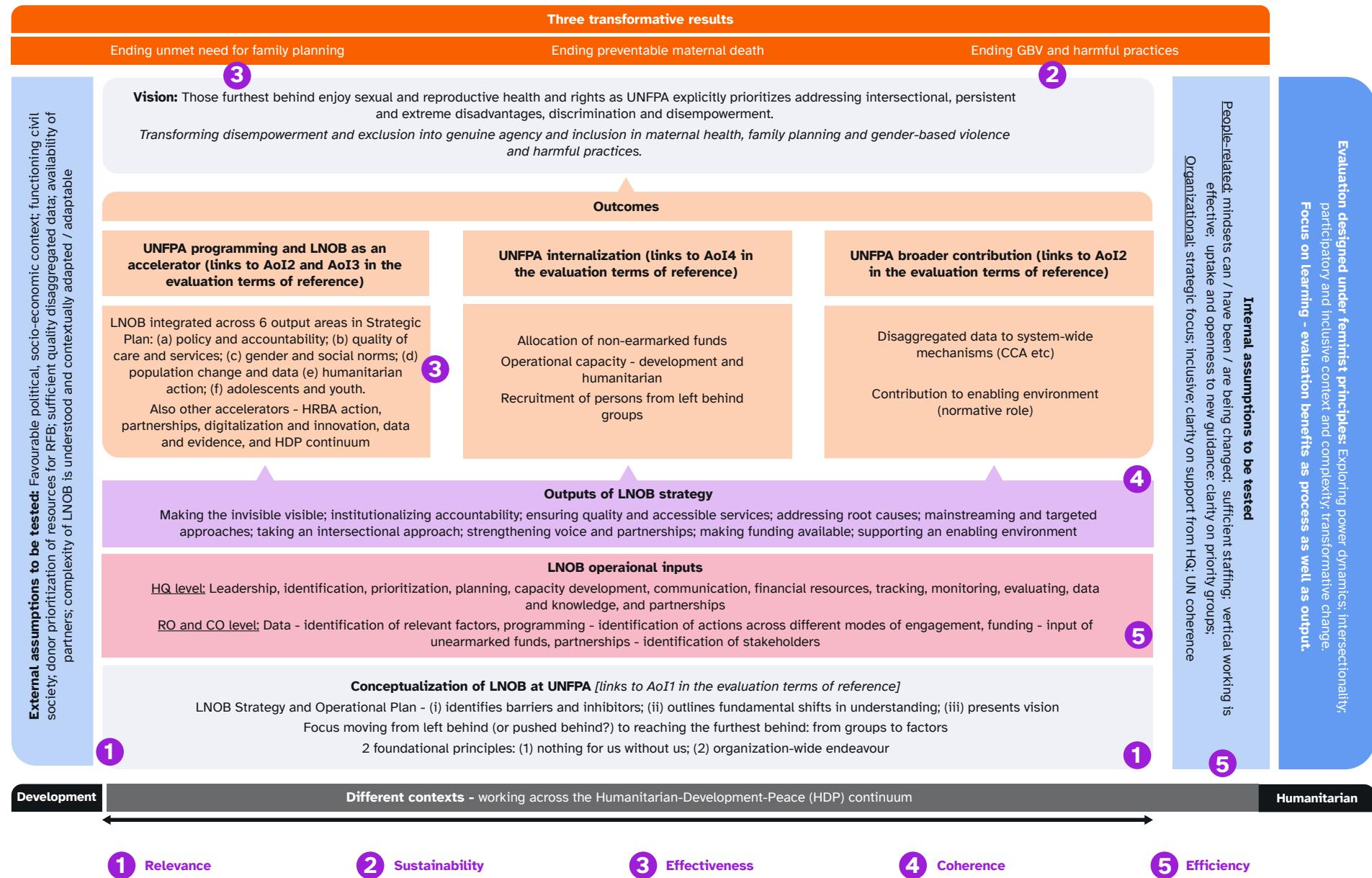
The theory of change highlights that this LNOB Operational Plan is intended to be applied across diverse contexts, including those defined by the HDP continuum.

All relevant components, along with the OECD-DAC criteria and evaluation questions are incorporated into the evaluation matrix. To ensure consistency, the evaluation matrix also indicates how each question relates back to this guiding framework.

A summary version of the evaluation matrix is presented in Table 1. The full matrix, including evaluation questions, assumptions, indicators or benchmarks, data sources, analysis methods and linkages to the theory of change, is available in Annex I (Volume II).

⁵⁴ Terms of reference for the evaluation are provided in Annex X, Volume II.

Figure 4: Constructed evaluation theory of change



Since UNFPA's approach to LNOB is not a specific, measurable intervention, but rather conceptualized as an accelerator and a cross-cutting principle to support comprehensive rights-based programming, UNFPA had not applied a results-based management framework to its LNOB work. Given that LNOB is embedded within broader programming, the evaluation matrix was designed to assess the integration of LNOB in UNFPA institutional frameworks as well as a guiding principle across multiple programmatic areas. This is reflected in the evaluation questions and criteria, which are aligned with OECD-DAC criteria, ensuring a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of how LNOB influences programming outcomes.

Table 1: Short evaluation matrix with evaluation questions

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation questions	Assumptions
Relevance	<p>Evaluation question 1: To what extent is the LNOB Operational Plan relevant to: (a) realities at community, subnational, and national levels; and (b) the UNFPA mandate?</p> <p><i>Feminist principles: a focus on learning regarding the conceptualization of the LNOB Operational Plan; and a focus on intersectionality</i></p>	<p>1.1 The strategic approach to LNOB and RFB has evolved to focus on factors of exclusion and discrimination rather than groups, which is relevant to addressing the intersectional needs of those left behind.</p> <p>1.2 The LNOB Operational Plan is relevant to different contexts and allows for and promotes reaching the furthest behind regardless of political capital expended on working with certain groups.</p> <p>1.3 The LNOB Operational Plan is relevant to the UNFPA mandate and contributes to the three transformative goals.</p>
Effectiveness Sustainability	<p>Evaluation question 2: To what extent has the LNOB Operational Plan been effectively operationalized at country, regional, and global levels?</p> <p><i>Feminist principles: participatory and inclusive approach, centring and prioritizing the perspectives of those most left behind</i></p>	<p>2.1 The fundamental shifts and principles within the LNOB Operational Plan have been consistently understood and meaningfully incorporated into planning at regional and country levels.</p> <p>2.2 The LNOB Operational Plan has been meaningfully operationalized at country, regional and global levels across the six output areas.</p> <p>2.3 LNOB has been fully leveraged as an accelerator and has been linked to other accelerators, across country, regional and global levels, where alignment exists.</p> <p>2.4 UNFPA has, across levels, identified and implemented mitigation measures for the external barriers to effective LNOB programming</p> <p>2.5 UNFPA meaningfully engages with, works with, and listens to, organizations led by representatives of left-behind groups at country, regional and global levels.</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation questions	Assumptions
Effectiveness	Evaluation question 3:	3.1 UNFPA country offices in humanitarian and crisis or fragile contexts (including during COVID-19) have been able to continue LNOB programming, supported by the LNOB Operational Plan.
Humanitarian	To what extent has the LNOB Operational Plan been effectively adapted for humanitarian and crisis contexts?	3.2 UNFPA country offices in humanitarian and crisis or fragile contexts (including during COVID-19) were and still are able to understand changing dynamics of vulnerability and identify emerging and new left behind populations.
	<i>Feminist principles: understanding changing power dynamics as contexts change</i>	
Coherence	Evaluation question 4:	4.1 The LNOB Operational Plan is coherent with, and has continued over time to be aligned to, global UNFPA frameworks including the Strategic Plan.
	<i>Feminist principles: UNFPA contribution to transformative change</i>	4.2 The LNOB Operational Plan adds value to a broader attempt to reach left-behind groups within the United Nations system, adding value specifically through the provision of disaggregated and localized data to governments and the United Nations system.
		4.3 UNFPA's normative policy and advocacy interventions with governments, particularly through a human rights-based approach and promoting human rights instruments, increases interventions aimed at reaching those furthest behind.
Efficiency	Evaluation question 5:	5.1 The internalization of LNOB principles, including specifically: (a) allocation of earmarked funds; and (b) allocation and training of staffing for operationalization of LNOB across different modes of engagement, has been implemented consistently and efficiently across different levels of UNFPA.
	<i>Feminist principles: empowerment and capacity building questions on HR and employing persons from left behind groups, and social justice and accountability for financial resource allocation</i>	5.2 UNFPA systematically and proactively seeks to employ persons from left-behind groups.
		5.3 UNFPA has an efficient organizational structure for the implementation of LNOB approaches.
		5.4 UNFPA recognized and efficiently addressed the internal barriers to the LNOB approach.
		5.5 UNFPA has the capacity to monitor, collect and disaggregate its data and results to assess existing inequalities and ensure UNFPA reaches specific groups who are the furthest behind.

Based on this evaluation matrix, data collection methods and tools were designed to ensure that evidence was gathered consistently across the various levels of this evaluation – country, regional and global levels. Further, an evidence database was created to systematically collate, record and code all evidence in a way that facilitated comprehensive analysis.

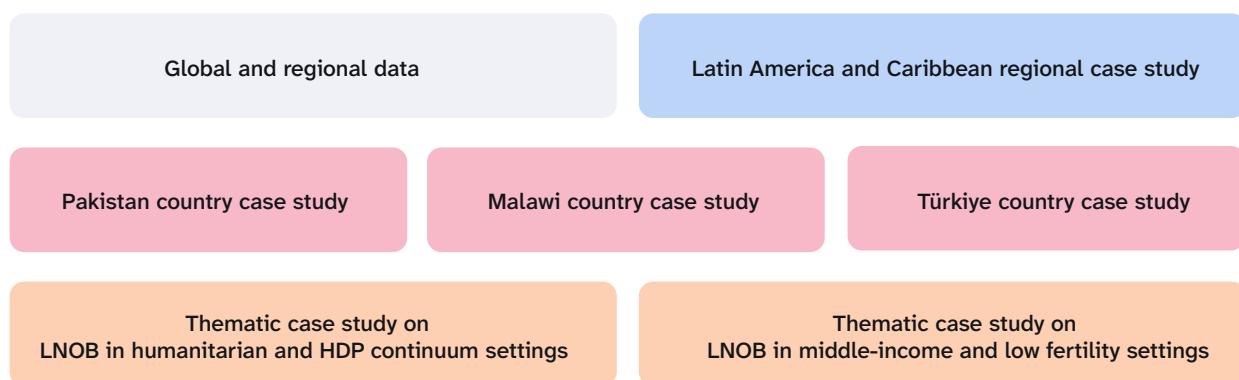
3.3 Methods and tools

3.3.1 Methods overview

The evaluation adopted a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, with a priority on qualitative data. This approach ensured adequate sample sizes and applied the UNFPA ‘Gender Plus’ approach to ensure the inclusion of diverse stakeholders. The data collection methods and tools were designed to complement each other, offering the most suitable combination of data sources for triangulating findings against each assumption.

Primary and secondary data were gathered through document reviews, key informant interviews (KIIIs) that were conducted both in person and remotely, FGDs, and a largely quantitative online survey. This mixed methods approach enabled rigorous testing of the constructed theory of change by exploring the causal links between outputs and expected outcomes, as well as examining the assumptions. It provided strong evidence to address the five evaluation questions. The evaluation was framed around seven different overall datasets, as mentioned in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Core datasets and sources of evidence



The global and regional case study included document reviews, primary data collection through interviews, and an online survey. The Latin America and Caribbean case study included in-country data collection in Panama, Costa Rica and Peru over three weeks. It also served as a pilot case study that informed the revision of data collection tools. Three additional country case studies – Malawi, Pakistan and Türkiye – involved one week in-country data collection to generate evidence for the evaluation questions. Two thematic case studies were conducted remotely to support learning on common themes across all regions: the LNOB in humanitarian and HDP continuum settings study focused on selected humanitarian and HDP continuum country contexts covering the Arab States and West and Central Africa regions; whereas the LNOB in middle-income

and low-fertility settings paid special attention to the intersections between UNFPA work on LNOB, demographic resilience, and life-cycle approaches, particularly in the Asia and Pacific and Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions.

Table 2 provides an overview of data collection methods across datasets and the following section (3.3.2) describes each data collection method followed by a descriptive analysis of data collected (3.3.3), sampling strategies (3.3.4) and data collection tools (3.3.5).

Table 2: Overview of data collection methods across datasets

	Global and regional data	Regional LAC case study	Country case studies (3)	Thematic case studies (2)
Document review	✓	✓	✓	✓
Key informant interviews	✓	✓	✓	✓
Online survey	✓			
FGDs		✓	✓	

3.3.2 Data collection methods

The **document review** included strategic, programmatic and operational documents at global, regional and country levels, provided by various units at UNFPA headquarters, regional and country offices, as well as by external stakeholders. Additionally, the evaluation team conducted supplementary research to triangulate evidence during data collection, analysis and reporting phases. The full list of documents reviewed are provided in Annex IX, Volume II, and referenced in footnotes throughout this report as applicable.

Semi-structured key informant interviews and small group discussions were critical sources of data that generated rich insights cutting across all evaluation questions and theory of change assumptions. Interviews were conducted in person or remotely at global, regional and country levels. Data from the interviews assisted in explaining 'how' and 'why' change occurred or did not occur, directly linking to the examination of the theory of change's pathways from outputs to outcomes. For both remote and in-person interviews, the evaluation team consulted informants regarding translation or interpretation needs or any other accommodation requests. The key informant interviews aspired to be non-extractive, encouraging meaningful discussions and learning exchanges between evaluators and interviewees. They focused on incorporating perspectives and suggestions for improvement into the evaluation narrative. An anonymized list of all key informants interviewed – providing titles only, is included in Annex VI, Volume II.

An online survey was conducted to gather further data and evidence for the evaluation questions and theory of change assumptions at country and regional levels. Results were mainly used as a triangulation point for other evidence generated through the

evaluation. The survey targeted UNFPA staff responsible for LNOB work at country and regional levels. To maximize its utility, the survey followed a sequential and exploratory design, developed mid-way through data collection to address critical evidence gaps and for triangulation purposes. Respondents' profile information was collected to enable deeper disaggregated analyses, with confidentiality guaranteed. The survey, available in English, French and Spanish, was administered through Kobo Toolbox and was open for three weeks. While primarily quantitative in design, the survey included questions encouraging respondents to provide additional qualitative feedback for each question. The survey questions are provided in Annex IV, Volume II. Results are also referenced throughout the report findings section as applicable.

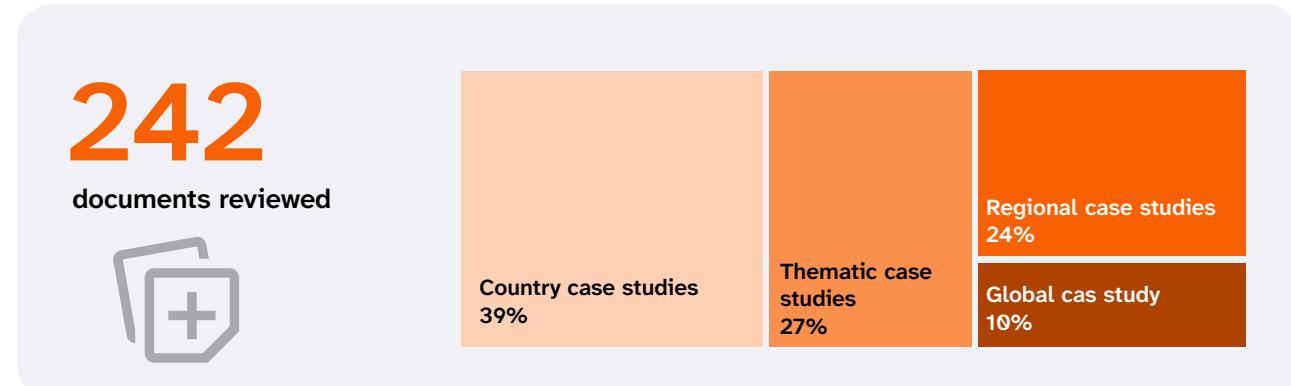
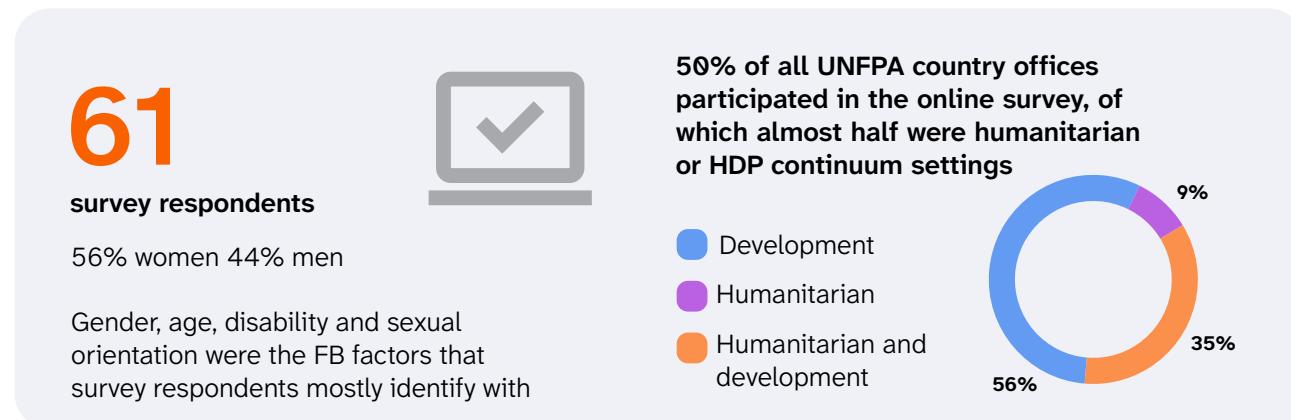
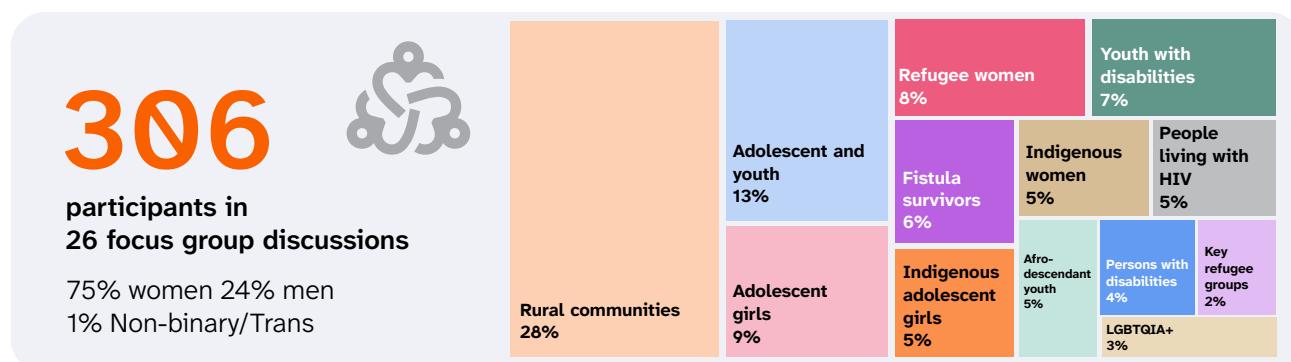
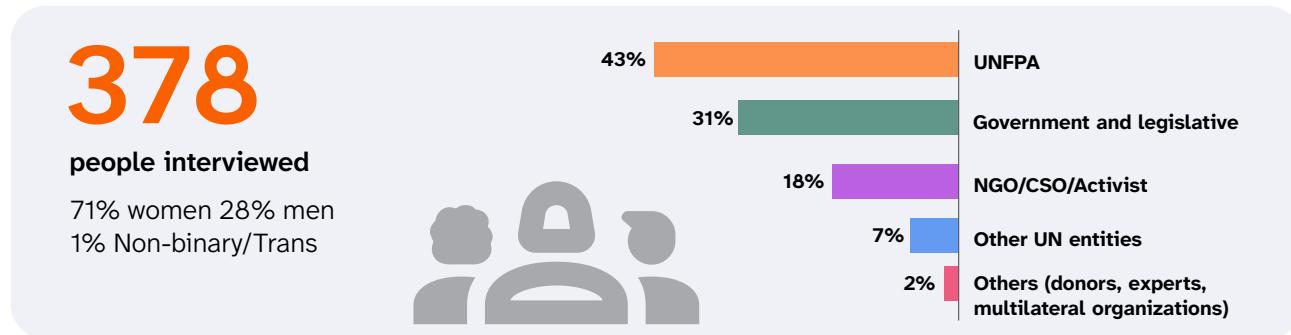
FGDs were central to the evaluation, aiming to meaningfully capture the voices and perspectives of left-behind stakeholders supported by UNFPA's work. These discussions were structured in an empowering, respectful and non-tokenistic manner, carefully considering power dynamics in group composition, location, timing and format. Efforts were made to ensure inclusive participation without pressure, while prompts were designed to enable two-way discussions. The FGDs were conducted exclusively with community members already engaged with UNFPA and its implementing partners and provided informed feedback on current practices while identifying potential improvements. The process incorporated anthropological observation to capture verbal and non-verbal responses, stakeholder interactions and power dynamics.



3.3.3 Description of data collected

Figure 6 offers a detailed overview of the data collected for the evaluation, including a disaggregated breakdown of participants by data collection method. The data are presented to illustrate the diversity of participants and to demonstrate how various demographic and contextual factors were represented in the evaluation. The figure also includes a breakdown of participants' intersectional characteristics, such as age, disability, income, location, migration status and sexual orientation, characteristics that are essential for understanding the experiences and challenges faced by those furthest behind.

Figure 6: Descriptive overview of data collected for the evaluation



3.3.4 Sampling

Given the formative nature of the evaluation, purposive sampling was used to select all regional, thematic and country case studies, as well as key informants, FGD participants and documents reviewed. This focused approach was intended to ensure that the sample captured a diverse range of perspectives needed to effectively answer the evaluation questions. Importantly, the selection considered the various furthest-behind factors UNFPA works with to ensure that the voices of those who face the greatest challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health and rights were adequately represented.

Sampling for case studies

The country case studies were purposively sampled using selection criteria that included: geographical diversity; income level according to World Bank classifications; UNFPA tier classification;⁵⁵ total fertility rates; humanitarian contexts; and country programmes that focus on or are representative of populations that experience significant exclusion or discrimination. Countries were excluded if the security situation posed risks to the evaluation team's safety or if the country was undergoing or planning a concurrent evaluation, in order to avoid evaluation fatigue. It should be noted that the Latin America and Caribbean region was an intentional selection due to its extensive work with people of African descent, indigenous people and persons with disabilities, as well as the existence of its Leave No One Behind Regional Strategy.⁵⁶

The thematic case studies aimed to ensure that the evaluation captured the diversity of contexts where UNFPA operates, providing complementary insights that enhanced the overall findings of the evaluation. These case studies were strategically selected to reflect a diverse range of geographical areas and operating contexts, addressing key issues within UNFPA's work.

 The thematic case study on LNOB in humanitarian and HDP continuum settings responds to the growing relevance of a humanitarian response within UNFPA and centred on reviewing the humanitarian structure of UNFPA with regard to LNOB in regions that have multiple ongoing crises, such as the Arab States region and the West and Central Africa region. Sampling within this study was based on information from initial consultations with regional humanitarian advisors to gather expert insights on the most relevant and impactful countries for the study. This was followed by an assessment of which countries could provide useful information on potential good practices and common challenges within the humanitarian context. The selection aimed to capture a range of humanitarian

⁵⁵ UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan, 2022-2025. Annex 3 Business model.

⁵⁶ Since 2019, the LAC region has implemented a LNOB Regional Strategy and developed an extensive portfolio of work addressing issues related to people of African descent, indigenous people and persons with disabilities. LACRO had initially planned to evaluate this strategy alongside the global evaluation. To optimize resources and avoid duplication of efforts, including an in-depth case study on LACRO and its LNOB strategy within the global LNOB evaluation was considered a more efficient approach than conducting two separate evaluations.

crises, considering factors such as the scale of the crises, the complexity of the situations, and the capacity of UNFPA to operate effectively in those environments. Based on this assessment, the final selections were Sudan and the Whole of Syria response in the Arab States region, and Burkina Faso and Nigeria from the West and Central Africa region. The thematic case study on LNOB in middle-income and low fertility settings was informed by recent evaluation evidence showing some of the successes and challenges of implementing the LNOB accelerator in middle-income and low-fertility settings.⁵⁷ Notably, 18 per cent of UNFPA country offices operate in high- or upper middle-income countries (UMIC) with fertility rates below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, presenting unique demographic and policy challenges. Within this case study, the sampling criteria focused on fertility rates and diverse cultural contexts. The selected countries included Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, China, Iran, North Macedonia and Thailand and were chosen to reflect a broad range of demographic realities in order to gain insights into how the LNOB Operational Plan is adapted and applied across different contexts.

Sampling for key informant interviews and focus group discussions

The purposive sampling strategy was designed to ensure a comprehensive, inclusive and diverse representation of stakeholders. As a first step, a stakeholder mapping⁵⁸ was undertaken during the inception phase, which identified key informant categories critical to the evaluation's objectives. This mapping focused on United Nations entities, organizations and individuals who have played a role in the development or implementation of UNFPA's LNOB Operational Plan or key partners to UNFPA's LNOB work. At the global level, the evaluation reached out to LNOB focal points and specialists across different UNFPA branches, units and regional offices, as well as global UNFPA partners, including experts, civil society representatives, other United Nations agencies and donors. For the regional and country case studies, the evaluation team worked closely with UNFPA regional and country offices to identify appropriate key informants and FGD participants, and this work involved an analysis of their country programme documents and initiatives to ensure that a range of stakeholders were represented. These included UNFPA staff, implementing partners, donors, government representatives, civil society organizations, grassroots movements, activists and other local stakeholders. The selection of participants was also aligned with the thematic focus of each case study. For instance, in cases focused on humanitarian contexts or demographic challenges, the evaluation specifically targeted UNFPA humanitarian and population and development advisers at regional and country levels.

Online survey sampling

The purposive sampling strategy for the online survey was designed to ensure that the perspectives of key UNFPA stakeholders involved in the implementation of the LNOB Operational Plan were effectively captured across various levels and regions.

⁵⁷ Mid-term evaluation of the strategic plan and regional programme evaluations (currently unpublished).

⁵⁸ Stakeholder map available in Volume II, Annex VII.

The online survey specifically targeted UNFPA LNOB focal points at both the country and regional levels. To achieve a broad and representative sample, the survey was distributed to 127 key UNFPA offices, which included 119 UNFPA country offices, six UNFPA regional offices and two UNFPA subregional offices. The survey was sent to UNFPA deputy representatives and heads of offices at these locations, who were responsible for identifying and designating one focal point per office to complete the survey. This approach ensured that the survey reached the appropriate staff members who had direct knowledge of, and experience with, the LNOB Operational Plan and its implementation at both the national and regional levels.

Sampling of documents and data

These were purposively selected to provide a relevant and encompassing review. During the inception phase, the UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) enabled access to a wide range of strategic and programming documents related to LNOB. The regional and country offices further compiled a comprehensive set of reports, publications and evaluations that covered their programming from 2018 to 2024. Key informants also provided relevant documents that were reviewed. For triangulation purposes, additional documents and online resources were also reviewed.

3.3.5 Data collection tools

Semi-structured interview guides were developed aligned with the evaluation matrix. The evaluation team also developed a checklist provided to UNFPA country offices prior to country visits to outline the expectations of the evaluation and to help prepare for a feminist approach to the evaluation. The guides for key informant interviews, FGDs and the checklist are provided in Annex II, Volume II. The online survey questionnaire is provided in Annex IV, Volume II.

To ensure the robustness and reliability of the data collection tools used in the evaluation, all instruments were tested and validated before being finalized. This process involved testing draft protocols for semi-structured interviews and FGDs and the survey questionnaire being modified accordingly. A second step to ensure ‘face validity’ of the survey questionnaire was for an expert on questionnaire construction to check the survey for common errors such as double-barrelled, confusing or leading questions. The evaluation team further piloted the draft online survey before its launch.

3.4 Data analysis methods

The evaluation applied different data analysis methods and multiple layers of analysis. The process began with the systematic coding of data within evidence databases by each evaluation question and assumption, followed by data analysis, triangulation and strength of evidence rating. The specific processes and methods employed in the analysis are described below.

3.4.1 Data coding and processing

Evidence databases were used to collate, code and analyse primary and secondary data at the global, regional, country and thematic levels. This approach enabled the synthesis of findings for the evaluation report, ensuring a rigorous approach to data recording and analysis. All data collected were coded against the evaluation questions and assumptions and disaggregated by gender, type of respondents and localities. Coding and analysis were iterative to identify gaps in the datasets that needed further exploration and attention.

3.4.2 Data analysis

Qualitative data

The evaluation relied predominantly on qualitative data, in line with the feminist approach adopted for this evaluation.⁵⁹ Content analysis constituted the core of the qualitative analysis across case studies, alongside descriptive analysis to understand the broader contexts within which UNFPA LNOB programming takes place. Contribution analysis was used to understand logical connections behind the observed results, including understanding the role of UNFPA and other internal or external factors in influencing those outcomes.

Quantitative data

Quantitative data collected from the online survey were systematically analysed using Microsoft Excel and R Studio to generate visualizations and descriptive statistics, providing insights into data trends and patterns.

Triangulation of data and assessment of evidence strength

The evaluation triangulated data from multiple data sources to validate and cross check all gathered evidence. In line with good evaluation practice, the quality and quantity of evidence were assessed to ensure the findings were reliable, credible and well-supported. A ‘strength of evidence’ rating (see Table 3) was applied to categorize findings based on the level of triangulation achieved:

- **Quality of the evidence:** the evaluation team considered factors such as the source and reliability of the quantitative and qualitative data (where applicable or relevant), and any obvious biases (for example, information bias, selection bias – see limitations in Section 3.9)
- **Quantity of the evidence:** the evaluation team assessed the extent to which findings were consistent after being triangulated across sources of information. Quantification was used to supplement (and not replace) the overall qualitative analysis. Since not all pieces of evidence are equal in terms of quality or credibility, this process served as an additional step for validation and verification rather than the foundation for determining findings.

⁵⁹ A feminist approach prioritizes lived experiences, context, and diverse voices, particularly from marginalized groups, with qualitative data being essential to capturing the complexity of these experiences while remaining sensitive to power dynamics, intersectionality, and the voices of those “furthest behind.”

The triangulation process was further supported by coding all qualitative data and populating the evaluation evidence matrix by evaluation questions and assumptions. This provided a structured and rigorous approach to data recording and analysis, complementing the assessment of the strength of each finding.

Table 3: Evidence strength ratings for key findings

1. Good quality of evidence from an adequate number of reliable sources plus source or method triangulation	2. A mix of good quality evidence and weaker evidence or evidence gaps	3. Evidence or major evidence gaps making triangulation impossible
---	--	--

3.4.3 Meta-analysis of datasets and case studies

Following the development of case studies across the seven datasets, the evaluation team developed a comprehensive database that consolidated findings from each of the seven data sets and case studies and included an assessment of the strength of the evidence for each finding. Survey results were used to complement the case study evidence but were not treated as a standalone source for developing findings. This comprehensive database allowed the evaluation team to analyse and triangulate the evidence, thereby substantiating the findings.

A data analysis workshop was conducted, during which the team performed a thorough review of all evidence for each evaluation question using the comprehensive evidence database. The team systematically revisited the original evidence to confirm that all findings were well supported and that every assumption related to the evaluation questions was adequately addressed. A dedicated session at the end of the analysis workshop was held to review all evaluation findings, ensuring that all evaluation questions were comprehensively answered and substantiated with strong evidence.

3.5 Generation of recommendations

The collaborative discussions and collective ‘sense-making’ during the data analysis workshop led to formulation of key findings, and insights for conclusions and recommendations. Both internal and external validation techniques were employed to ensure their robustness. This included sharing the initial findings with the Steering Committee for feedback and validation. Additionally, to enhance the potential utilization of the evaluation results, key evaluation findings were also discussed with UNFPA staff involved in the development of the next strategic plan.

The draft recommendations were derived from conclusions and findings with a clear connection to the evidence. In line with the utilization-focused evaluation approach, the draft recommendations were reviewed and discussed with the Steering Committee and the Evaluation Reference Group. This collaborative process aimed to further refine the recommendations and ensure they were actionable, feasible and aligned with the goals of the evaluation as well as the broader organizational context.

3.6 Quality assurance

Quality assurance was integrated into the evaluation process at multiple levels. The Steering Committee and the Evaluation Reference Group provided inputs at critical stages (specifically, the inception report, findings, conclusions and recommendations validation workshop, and revision of the draft evaluation report). All case studies and the final report were reviewed by the evaluation team leader and the Euro Health Group quality assurance manager, as well as by the UNFPA independent evaluation office and relevant staff from regional and country offices. As part of the UNFPA evaluation quality assurance and assessment system, the Independent Evaluation Office was responsible for quality assurance throughout each phase of the evaluation.

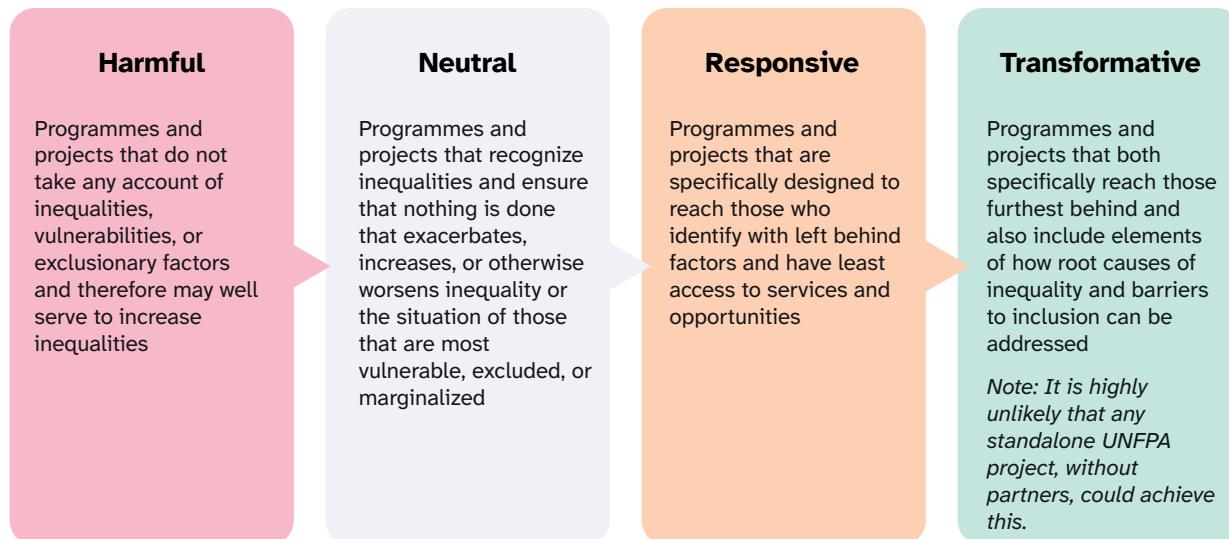
3.7 LNOB transformative continuum

The evaluation team introduced an LNOB-transformative continuum as part of the evaluation design to identify where various UNFPA projects and programmes could be positioned along a spectrum of inclusion. This continuum also aimed to support a reflexive process within UNFPA during both data collection and analysis (see Figure 7).

The continuum spans four levels:

- **Harmful initiatives**, which fail to consider inequalities and may inadvertently reinforce or worsen them;
- **Neutral initiatives**, which acknowledge inequalities and ensure they are not exacerbated, but do not proactively address them;
- **Responsive initiatives**, which are specifically designed to reach and include individuals affected by “left behind” factors; and
- **Transformative initiatives**, which go beyond inclusion to tackle the root causes of inequalities and promote lasting change for those furthest behind.

Figure 7: LNOB transformative continuum



Source: Evaluation team

As the evaluation unfolded, evidence of UNFPA's approach to supporting the LNOB principles, as well as its results, provided a more nuanced picture. UNFPA's approach to LNOB is embedded in programming in different manners and at different levels and, therefore, can combine initiatives at different scales of the continuum. Although the continuum has not been systematically applied as initially planned, the continuum served as the overall lens to guide the analysis across all evaluation questions, and the evaluation identified several cases where UNFPA's programming has a transformative potential, as well as where there are unintended outcomes that could potentially be harmful.

3.8 An inclusive and participatory approach

An inclusive, respectful and participatory approach was ensured throughout each stage of the evaluation, ensuring that stakeholders had meaningful opportunities for engagement. "Meaningful engagement" was defined, for the purposes of this evaluation, as being treated with respect, having one's perspectives integrated into the design of the evaluation, findings, conclusions and recommendations, and finding the process interesting, useful, empowering and beneficial.

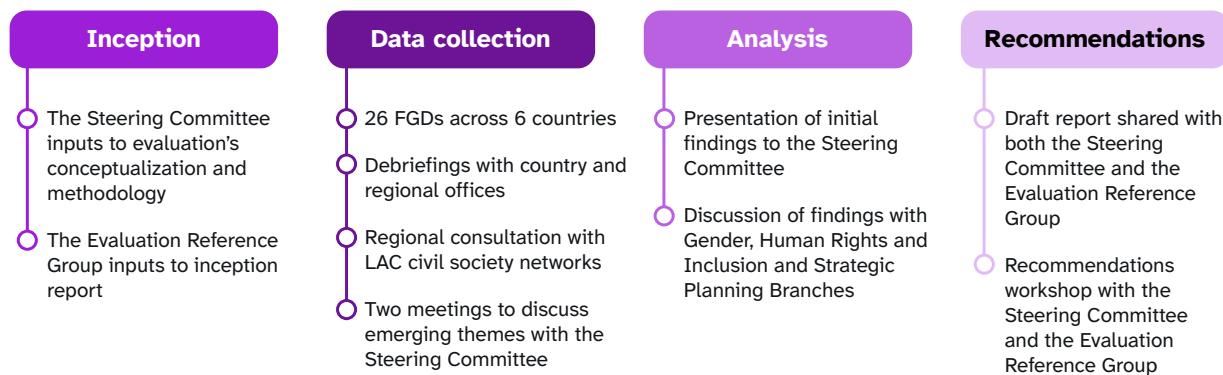
This approach was partially implemented through a global Steering Committee that provided regular oversight and input. The Steering Committee, composed of people representing left-behind factors, provided key inputs at critical stages of the evaluation process, which were carefully considered (see Box 2). Annex III, Volume II also provides insights and lessons learned on their engagement.

Box 2: Meaningful engagement of rights holders within this evaluation

A key objective of this evaluation was to integrate practical and innovative ways to engage rights holders who represent a diversity of factors often associated with discrimination and exclusion throughout the evaluation. While many evaluations, within and outside of UNFPA, attempt to engage rights holders in evaluation processes, it is important to note that within this evaluation the meaningful engagement of rights holders who represent those often left behind is not just a way of doing things, it is an objective within its own right. In many instances, these right holders are engaged in limited or tokenistic ways, being consulted within FGDs; or perhaps being used for data collection, for example, but not in the design, analysis, or strategic steering of the evaluative exercise. This evaluation went beyond such practices, ensuring that rights holders were meaningfully engaged in every phase of the evaluation. They were involved as members of a Steering Committee, as evaluators and as participants in the validation process. These varied forms of meaningful participation helped to rebalance the power dynamics often experienced in development interventions by giving an oversight and decision-making role to rights holders who represent those often left behind.

Additionally, a collaborative approach between the evaluation team and UNFPA was fostered to facilitate consistent exchange and reflection on the learnings emerging from interactions and evidence. Ongoing exchanges and debriefings with country and regional offices, as well as with UNFPA staff responsible for developing the new strategic plan, created a feedback loop for emerging findings. Finally, for the Latin America and Caribbean region case study, a broader consultation on emerging findings brought together members of diverse groups with whom UNFPA collaborates.⁶⁰ Engagement of rights holders at critical junctures of the evaluation process is depicted in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Engagement of rights holders in the evaluation process



Source: Evaluation team

More specifically, during in-country data collection, a checklist was developed for country offices to support data collection, with specific action points to ensure that there were sufficient conditions and time to foster engagement with communities and stakeholders. Key informant interview protocols were adapted on a case-by-case basis, informed by prior exchanges between the evaluation team and UNFPA informants, which facilitated a better understanding of stakeholders' diverse cultural frameworks and social structures. The team also exercised a high degree of context sensitivity.

The FGDs were designed as a two-way process, not an extractive exercise. The evaluation process aimed to provide reciprocal and mutual learning, as well as a sharing of information for all participants. However, due to the busy schedules of in-country visits, limited time was allocated for FGDs. The evaluation team assessed that while the FGDs were not extractive, they were neither transformative nor empowering. Moreover, the evaluation process did not fully meet the aspiration of providing meaningful feedback to the communities visited. This reflects an important dichotomy in the evaluation process. On one hand, the evaluation was designed under feminist

⁶⁰ Titled “Intercultural Dialogue for Recognition and Inclusion: Weaving Strategies for Closing Inequality Gaps and Promoting Development,” two events gathered a total of 45 representatives or networks from each group. Discussions held were systematized in a stand-alone report (in Spanish) and have also been integrated into the LAC case study report in two ways: as recommendations for the UNFPA LNOB approach, included as boxes under related findings; and as a source for triangulation and refinement of specific evidence and analyses.

principles and aligned with the overall vision of UNFPA's LNOB Operational Plan, but on the other hand, such aspirations were constrained by the obligations and timing of a corporate global evaluation. Finally, the Steering Committee's online meetings included sign language interpretation and Spanish translation. Translation for focus groups was provided when necessary, and UNFPA's disability guidelines for evaluations⁶¹ were followed, particularly during the organization of FGDs, as well as when ensuring the accessibility of the survey and online platforms used for interviews.

Power dynamics

The evaluation was designed to be sensitive to power dynamics, ensuring that the necessary enabling conditions were in place to prevent discrimination – whether by action or omission – and to allow the free, voluntary, respectful and safe participation of all population groups and individuals. Where necessary, affirmative actions were taken during data collection to promote inclusive and equitable participation, allowing all individuals to engage in a respectful, empowering and meaningful way.⁶² This included addressing disparities between institutional language and the lived experiences of stakeholders by adapting the LNOB language to reflect more context-specific narratives of UNFPA and its partners. The evaluation team members also acknowledged their external and privileged position, as well as the inherent power dynamics present in evaluation processes. To help mitigate these dynamics, the overall data collection approach was adjusted after the pilot case study to allow UNFPA staff to participate in key informant interviews and FGDs. This helped foster a more collaborative and formative process. Additionally, the team recognized and valued the agency of each informant, respecting and appreciating their unique histories, experiences and perspectives. Data were analysed with a strong awareness of power relations at both individual and structural levels, considering the various factors that shape and influence these dynamics.

Gender and human rights

The evaluation was guided by gender and human rights principles, both in terms of process and content. The design and methodology ensured that the evaluation was able to capture the extent to which a gender and human rights-based approach was integrated in UNFPA's support to the principles of LNOB and RFB. The evaluation matrix

61 UNFPA. Guidance on disability inclusion in UNFPA evaluations. 2020.

62 Examples of affirmative actions: (i) during a FGD in LAC with indigenous women, there was an overlap with the agenda of a local government interview. When government representatives joined the group, they were asked to leave and wait, prioritizing the voices and time of the indigenous women; (ii) while the evaluation team ensured respect to cultural norms and allowed for openness in FGDs so participants could self-organize to respect cultural norms – such as allowing elderly indigenous women to speak first and give consent for others to contribute – the team also ensured that, once trust was established, young indigenous women were encouraged and given the opportunity to express their views; (iii) in a more informal setting, such as a visit to a specific service, the evaluation team actively sought the perspective of the indigenous intercultural facilitator, focusing on the quality of the service and its intercultural approach; (iv) in Malawi, focus group participants were split into smaller groups on the basis of LNOB factors and gender identity, to enable more focused conversations and to provide a safer space for respondents to participate.

included specific assumptions on UNFPA Gender Plus conceptualization of LNOB, and intersectionality (Assumption 1.1), as well as on UNFPA's human rights-based approach to normative work and promotion of human rights instruments (Assumption 4.3). Furthermore, the design of the evidence database enabled the disaggregated recording of respondents' gender, allowing for the application of a gender lens in data analysis. Additionally, evidence for this report underwent a deliberate secondary analysis through a gender lens to ensure that a gendered perspective was incorporated into each finding where appropriate.

In alignment with the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples—which is particularly relevant to UNFPA's programming in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region—the LAC case study aimed to follow an indigenous evaluation approach. This involved the explicit acknowledgment of indigenous and ancestral knowledge systems, a crucial consideration in a region where several countries formally recognize ethnic-based systems in health and education. Although these concepts are often implied under the broader term “interculturality”, which is UNFPA's corporate framework for working with indigenous populations, the recommendation was made to explicitly state this recognition to ensure proper attention and respect. The LAC case study was intentionally reflective of local contexts, recognizing the broader role of indigenous knowledge in development, policymaking, and scientific discourse. This added an important analytical lens to the evaluation, allowing the team to identify where UNFPA's intercultural programming had acknowledged and engaged with indigenous and ancestral knowledge systems. Furthermore, deliberate efforts were made to ensure that these practices were accurately documented and appropriately represented in the final case study report.⁶³

Annex V, Volume II, provides further lessons learned on applying feminist principles in the evaluation.

3.9 Ethical considerations

The evaluation complies with the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation⁶⁴ and the UNEG Code of Conduct for Evaluation. In particular, the following ethical issues were considered:

Integrity: The evaluation process followed the highest ethical and professional standards, ensuring independence, impartiality, transparency and accountability in the collection, analysis and reporting of data. Every effort was made to safeguard against any form of bias, upholding the dignity of the individuals and communities involved in the evaluation. The evaluation team committed to an ongoing reflective practice and demonstrated trustworthy and credible conduct throughout.

⁶³ This approach followed the inputs of a Yanakuna indigenous woman, university professor, and scholar of indigenous knowledge systems that was contacted by the LACRO to provide technical and methodological guidance to the regional case study.

⁶⁴ United Nations Evaluation Group (2020). Ethical guidelines for evaluations.

Independence and Impartiality: The evaluation was conducted independently from any influence. The team had unrestricted access to relevant information and no conflicts of interest were identified prior to or during the evaluation. Findings and recommendations are based solely on objective evidence, free from external pressure or bias.

Transparency: The evaluation team ensured full and informed confidentiality for all stakeholders who participated on the evaluation. The evaluation team ensured transparency throughout the evaluation process by openly communicating the purpose, commissioners, criteria and expected outcomes of the evaluation. Confidentiality was prioritized, and stakeholders were made aware of how their data would be used and who would have access to them. Participants in key informant interviews, FGDs, and the online survey were informed about the evaluation's purpose and the handling of their data prior to participation. Active, informed consent was obtained, and, in most cases, this was done verbally.

Accountability: The evaluation team used an evidence database to ensure that the perspectives of all respondents to the evaluation were included in final analyses. Equal attention was given to all sources of evidence through a robust and objective system. Mechanisms for accountability included feedback sessions with country offices, regional networks, the Steering Committee and the Evaluation Reference Group. An audit trail was maintained to document how comments from stakeholders on the draft report were addressed.

Credibility: The evaluation team upheld independence, impartiality and rigor throughout the evaluation process. Triangulation of data from multiple sources ensured the credibility of findings and a transparent evaluation process was maintained. Stakeholder engagement and quality assurance measures strengthened the credibility of the results.

Respect: The evaluation team demonstrated cultural sensitivity by adapting the evaluation methods to fit with the norms and values of participants. Every effort was made to ensure the dignity of stakeholders was respected and the evaluation process was inclusive of diverse perspectives.

Beneficence: The evaluation team focused on how the findings could lead to positive changes and improvements for the participants. The findings were intended to advocate for policy changes and drive learning and positive change in the areas evaluated. The intention was for this evaluation to be a learning exercise and all activities were conducted bearing this in mind.

Data privacy and confidentiality: All data were anonymized, in accordance with UNFPA guidelines, and no citations in the report could be traced to specific individuals, titles, or roles. The evaluation adhered to the European Union General Data Protection Regulation standards. Only relevant data were collected, and they were securely stored on a project-specific Microsoft SharePoint owned by the evaluation firm. Audio

recordings of interviews were only done with prior permission, and recordings were securely stored in accordance with data protection protocols. All data will be deleted after the conclusion of the evaluation.

Safeguard mechanisms for respondents: The evaluation protocols and the evaluation team ensured that all data collection was sensitive to the needs and rights of vulnerable individuals. Trauma-informed processes were adopted to ensure participant well-being and ethical data collection. This included: emphasizing active informed consent beyond simple form-filling, with clear explanations of the discussion's purpose and use; ensuring participants understood their rights to skip questions or withdraw at any time; using culturally sensitive language and avoiding graphic or personal content; prioritizing participant autonomy by offering clear, continuous and accessible opt-out options, reinforcing the voluntary nature of participation; and creating a supportive environment for honest dialogue. When involving adolescents, the evaluation team ensured informed consent from their parents or legal guardians, in addition to the assent of the adolescents themselves.

Disclosure of use of artificial intelligence: No artificial intelligence was used during the evaluation process.

3.10 Limitations and mitigations

During the inception phase, the evaluation identified several potential limitations and intended mitigation measures. Table 4 provides a summarized overview of the anticipated and actual limitations, as well as the corresponding mitigation measures employed.

Table 4: Limitations and mitigation measures

Anticipated limitation	Anticipated mitigation measure	Actual limitation and mitigation
Extracting sufficient data from one regional, three country, and two thematic case studies to reach credible conclusions about LNOB at UNFPA	The evaluation team applied different mitigation strategies, including having a strong and purposeful sampling strategy, and ensuring that the thematic studies provided a broader overview of country-level work within the regions and contexts assessed. Global-level data and the online survey were designed to complement and provide a wider perspective.	Overall, the anticipated mitigation measures proved relevant. The thematic case studies included a rich array of evidence and data from different countries and a comprehensive view across regions and contexts. The global and regional data collection was thorough and garnered a strong response rate, with participants providing qualitative insights. During the data analysis, the evaluation team assessed the strength of evidence for each finding.

Anticipated limitation	Anticipated mitigation measure	Actual limitation and mitigation
Challenges in extracting accurate and usable financial data due to UNFPA's transition to a newer resource planning platform and the absence of a properly implemented LNOB financial tag	The evaluation relied on supplementary qualitative and quantitative data from case studies, stakeholder interviews and other available documentation to provide contextual insight into financial trends and inform the overall analysis.	The unavailability of LNOB financial data, particularly relevant to evaluation question 5 on efficiency and finding 15, which highlights that financial allocation does not align with LNOB commitments in the UNFPA Strategic Plan or LNOB Operational Plan. The strength of evidence rating for this finding reflects this limitation.
Potential for selection and information bias in evaluation methods	The evaluation team introduced measures to reduce bias including: targeting a diverse range of informants, ensuring saturation in interviews and group discussions to reduce selection bias; applying triangulation to minimize bias in data analysis; and ensuring confidentiality to all informants to mitigate social desirability bias. Further, the assessment of potential bias in the data was incorporated into the strength of evidence ranking for each finding.	<p>Overall, the anticipated mitigation measures were effective. In addition to those already mentioned, mixed methods were used for both data collection and analysis, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. Contextual sensitivity was a key principle, with careful attention given to the cultural, social and political nuances of each setting. Triangulation was further supported by drawing on multiple sources of evidence. Stakeholder consultations and validation exercises offered valuable opportunities for feedback, ensuring that diverse perspectives shaped the findings, conclusions and recommendations.</p> <p>Additionally, inclusivity in data collection was a priority, ensuring meaningful participation from underrepresented and left-behind groups and communities. The evaluation team was diverse, with a broad range of expertise, backgrounds and perspectives. This included core team members from the Global South and collaboration with national consultants in Costa Rica, Pakistan, Panama and Peru, which enriched the analysis and minimized homogeneity in viewpoints.</p> <p>The evaluation team also actively reflected on and addressed potential researcher bias, maintaining awareness of their own positionality and its possible impact on the evaluation process.</p>
Disruption in data collection due to insecurity in some countries	The evaluation team remained flexible in choosing countries for site visits and adapting meeting schedules in affected regions. Security protocols were followed, and alternative methods for data collection would have been considered in the event of disruptions.	Due to security concerns in Pakistan, data collection was conducted by a national consultant. The country office and consultant worked together to reschedule visits and ensure that data collection remained intact without compromising the process.

Anticipated limitation	Anticipated mitigation measure	Actual limitation and mitigation
Unavailability of key stakeholders due to limited time availability or interest in the evaluation	A four-month window was provided for data collection (July–October 2024). The evaluation team used a systematic approach to reach out to stakeholders and requested UNFPA's assistance if needed.	At the global level, this limitation did not substantially materialize, and the anticipated mitigation measures were effective. At regional and country levels, challenges arose in reaching out to some stakeholders. Mitigation strategies included: conducting interviews online after country visits and extensive triangulation; sharing evidence collected across ongoing evaluations; and extensive triangulation of data.
Impact of UNFPA institutional changes and imminent move to Nairobi on staff availability	The evaluation team allowed flexibility in scheduling interviews with key staff members; utilized remote methods of communication to conduct interviews or consultations; and, to the extent possible, coordinated with the IEO to anticipate potential delays or changes in staffing availability due to the organizational transition, while adjusting timelines and expectations accordingly.	Limitation did not substantially materialize, and the measures were already in place for other limitations.
Challenges in engaging with a sufficient number of community members to fully address evaluation principles and ensure the meaningful engagement of rights holders	<p>While individuals identifying with left-behind factors were engaged throughout the evaluation process via the establishment of a Steering Committee, additional engagement was planned through FGDs within the regional and country case studies.</p> <p>The evaluation relied significantly on the inputs and feedback from the Steering Committee to ensure representation of these groups in both the process and the content of the evaluation.</p>	<p>The evaluation conducted 26 FGDs, reaching a total of 306 stakeholders with diverse profiles. The evaluation team constantly analysed the risk of underrepresentation of persons and communities facing exclusion or discrimination. To further address this, additional interviews were conducted with activists and representatives of grassroots movements. Moreover, regional consultations in LAC were organized to engage underrepresented groups such as indigenous populations, people of African descent, persons with disabilities, youth and LGBTQIA+ persons.</p> <p>In addition, the careful planning of country visits ensured the inclusion of a diverse range of groups, while additional funding from the IEO, along with support from UNFPA regional and country offices, enabled the evaluation team to engage with community members who might not have otherwise been included.</p>

In addition to the anticipated challenges mentioned above, the evaluation also encountered several unforeseen challenges, including the following:

Consultations in hard-to-reach locations, limited time available for FGDs, and challenges in finding ways to provide proper feedback to the people consulted. The evaluation team made efforts to facilitate meaningful engagement, using different facilitation techniques, being aware of power dynamics within the groups and taking actions when needed to ensure balanced participation of all stakeholders, and being transparent about objectives, processes and limitations. A checklist for country offices was developed with specific action points to ensure adequate time and conditions for engaging with communities and stakeholders. The agendas were carefully crafted with the country offices and FGDs were prioritized over interviews, which could later be conducted online. In Peru, a national consultant was responsible for data collection, and the in-country data collection period was extended to almost two weeks to accommodate travel.

Accurately capturing the full profile of informants – particularly in recognizing that gender identity extends beyond the binary categories of female and male – and obtaining other critical demographic information related to left-behind factors was challenging due to issues of sensitivity, respondent privacy and data collection constraints. To mitigate these limitations, the evaluation team implemented several measures. Presence lists were utilized during FGDs and group interviews, incorporating fields that allowed informants to provide demographic information based on self-identification. The online survey also included specific questions designed to capture such data. Additionally, the team analysed existing UNFPA data on gender, equality and diversity to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the profile of UNFPA staff. The team acknowledges that these challenges are particularly significant for this evaluation, given its focus, but also reflect broader difficulties faced by evaluations striving to remain aligned with ongoing societal transformations.

Temporal scope of the evaluation and challenges related to consulting stakeholders engaged in previous initiatives. The evaluation team relied on annual reports, country and regional programme evaluations, other available documentation and the perspectives of key informants to reflect on lessons from past implementation.

LNOB monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data and challenges related to effectiveness assessment. While UNFPA output monitoring provided, to some extent, data to support effectiveness analysis, this is mainly related to targeted programming. However, as noted above, the UNFPA approach to LNOB is embedded in programming at different levels, often spanning a range of mutually reinforcing normative roles, capacity development, systems strengthening and targeted approaches. Such factors pose an additional challenge to building upon available data and assessing effectiveness, as monitoring of advocacy and upstream efforts is not adequately captured by UNFPA M&E systems. The evaluation took a comprehensive approach to data collection, both within and across datasets. Within datasets, the evaluation systematically inquired about data based on assumptions, ensuring that all areas

of inquiry and the theory of change were sufficiently covered. Across data sets, the diverse approach (global, regional, country and thematic case studies) also ensured a comprehensive, though qualitative, assessment of UNFPA LNOB results. The report clearly specifies which data cannot be interpreted as universal.



04

Findings

4.1 Evaluation question 1: Relevance

To what extent is the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan relevant to: (a) realities at community, subnational, and national levels; and (b) the UNFPA mandate?⁶⁵

Feminist principles applied: a focus on learning regarding the conceptualization of the LNOB Operational Plan and a focus on intersectionality.

Finding 1: While there is full awareness of, and agreement with, the principle of leaving no one behind across UNFPA at all levels (global, regional and country), there is more inconsistent awareness of the specific UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan. Where there is awareness, there is support for the concepts, particularly the move from groups to factors, but this is not without challenges.⁶⁶

Links to assumptions 1.1 and 1.2

Overall, leaving no one behind as a principle is well embedded within UNFPA. While many staff are unaware of the LNOB Operational Plan itself, the elevated position of LNOB in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 as an accelerator has resulted in almost all staff knowing and understanding the concepts of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind. There is a widespread appreciation for UNFPA's focus on this, with many respondents to this evaluation believing that LNOB is an inherent part of the UNFPA mandate. These respondents appreciate a greater focus on LNOB within current UNFPA strategic frameworks, such as within the current Strategic Plan 2022-2025.⁶⁷ Those who are aware of the LNOB Operational Plan find it to be encouraging, even symbolically, for UNFPA to have invested in this. There is a clear sense that UNFPA has always, quite naturally, sought to support the most marginalized, the most

⁶⁵ Evaluation Question 1 Assumptions: 1.1 The LNOB strategic approach to LNOB and RFB has evolved to focus on factors of exclusion and discrimination rather than groups, which is relevant to addressing the intersectional needs of those left behind; 1.2 The LNOB Operational Plan is relevant to different contexts, (including across diverse development and humanitarian settings) and allows for and promotes reaching the furthest behind regardless of political capital expended on working with certain groups; 1.3 The UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan is relevant to the UNFPA mandate and contributes to the three transformative goals.

⁶⁶ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, all thematic and country case studies, and the survey.

⁶⁷ Global, regional and country level UNFPA KIIs.

underserved, and the most excluded and that the LNOB Operational Plan adds strength to this inherent approach.⁶⁸

Even outside of UNFPA, there is recognition that UNFPA has made better efforts towards conceptualizing LNOB than most United Nations agencies. In 2022, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted a formative evaluation of LNOB and, as part of this, a comparative study was completed for other United Nations agencies, including UNFPA. This study highlighted that the UNFPA Gender Plus approach was considered good practice.⁶⁹ The study also included some positive perspectives on UNFPA's shift from groups to factors, which the UNDP evaluation mirrored by trying to avoid the word 'group', recognizing how much this framing hinders a meaningful understanding of intersectionality.⁷⁰

However, awareness of the specific LNOB Operational Plan is far from consistent across UNFPA. Across all levels (global, regional and country), there are significant numbers of UNFPA staff who have no knowledge of the LNOB Operational Plan.⁷¹ Some respondents to this evaluation vaguely referenced the LNOB assessment tool (the prioritization tool) that was rolled out "a few years ago",⁷² but they were unaware of what subsequently happened with that tool. The feedback on that tool was quite consistent: while the development of the tool was considered laudable, the tool itself was considered cumbersome and too academic and complex to be pragmatically useful for UNFPA country offices.⁷³

In addition to this, there is some confusion among UNFPA staff about the different strategies and plans for different groups that still exist within UNFPA.⁷⁴ Respondents reported concerns about the fragmentation of efforts within UNFPA, with the coexistence of the LNOB Operational Plan alongside corporate strategies targeting specific groups, such as people of African descent and persons with disabilities appearing inconsistent with the shift from groups to factors.⁷⁵ These targeted strategies were developed prior to the LNOB Operational Plan, which then introduced a conceptual shift of focus from groups to intersecting factors, but did not provide enough incorporated guidance on how the overall LNOB approach complemented, aligned with, and included the pre-existing targeted strategies. Therefore, although these strategies align with external frameworks, such as the 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' and the 'United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy' and the 'International

⁶⁸ Global UNFPA KII.

⁶⁹ UNDP (2022). Formative Evaluation of the Integration by UNDP of the Principles of Leaving No One Behind. And other UN KII.

⁷⁰ Despite this understanding, UNDP retain a LNOB marker for all programmes using a group classification.

⁷¹ Global, regional and country level UNFPA KII.

⁷² Regional UNFPA KII.

⁷³ Regional and country level UNFPA KII.

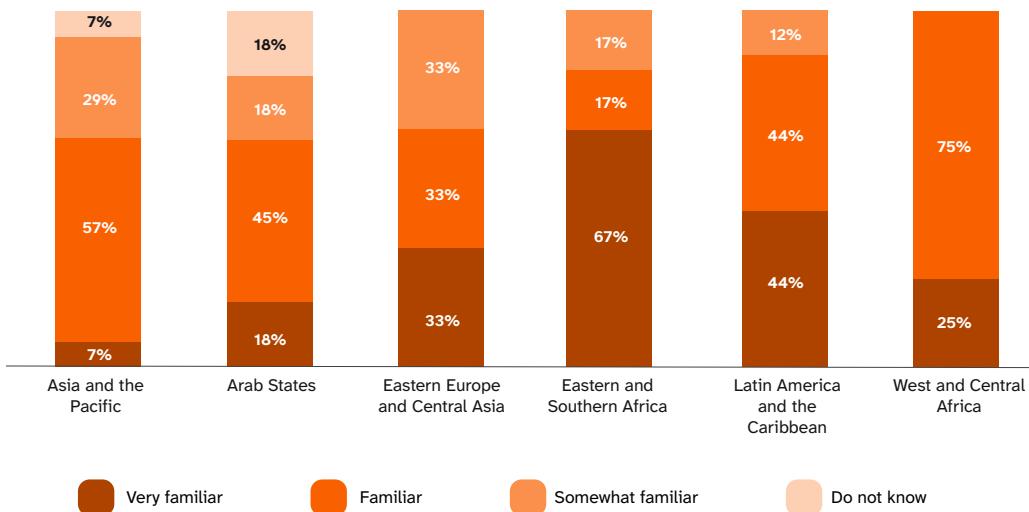
⁷⁴ Global and regional level UNFPA KII.

⁷⁵ Regional and country level UNFPA KII.

Decade for People of African Descent', respondents felt that a unified message on the UNFPA LNOB approach was lacking.⁷⁶

At the regional level, there are vast differences in terms of both awareness and use of the specific LNOB Operational Plan.⁷⁷ Figure 9 presents regional variations in respondents' familiarity with the LNOB Operational Plan, based on the online survey data.⁷⁸

Figure 9: Familiarity with the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan across regional and country-level staff



Source: Evaluation online survey results (question 1).

Differences in terms of familiarity with the LNOB Operational Plan were also seen across countries within regions according to key informant interviews and country case studies. For example, in Malawi there is limited understanding of the LNOB Operational Plan. The majority of UNFPA staff, together with all implementing partners, were not familiar with the LNOB Operational Plan and were not aware of it.⁷⁹ This was mainly attributed to a lack of awareness-raising by UNFPA at global and regional levels on the existence of the Operational Plan, and the adoption of a top-down approach in creating the LNOB Operational Plan to begin with.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ UNFPA global and regional KIIs for the UMIC and low fertility case study.

⁷⁷ This evaluation had three specific country case studies, being Malawi, Pakistan and Türkiye, as well as a broader survey. This point reflects the data collected across both the three country case studies and the survey.

⁷⁸ This survey data reflect a broad sampling of respondents' perspectives and is presented without further analysis, offering indicative insights.

⁷⁹ KIIs with UNFPA country office staff.

⁸⁰ KIIs with implementing partners.

Conversely, in other countries, UNFPA staff and partners showed greater familiarity with the Operational Plan. For example, in Pakistan, there is very good awareness across UNFPA Pakistan staff of the LNOB Operational Plan and a sense that it is relevant to the Pakistan context; and that the shift from groups to factors is positive and useful. Multiple UNFPA staff in Pakistan confirmed their awareness of the LNOB Operational Plan and were able to fully articulate the practical measures to ensure that, in addition to general communities, particularly underprivileged and marginalized communities are also supported to access services. The shift of focus from groups to factors is well understood in Pakistan, and considered a useful shift, as vulnerabilities are understood to be “dynamic and multifaceted” across different development and humanitarian contexts within the country and the notion of factors helps to identify vulnerabilities better.⁸¹

In Türkiye, while there is familiarity with the plan, the country office had been conceptualizing the LNOB approach with a focus on factors of exclusion and discrimination before UNFPA’s global LNOB Operational Plan was developed. UNFPA Türkiye staff report that they were involved in the LNOB reference group contributing expertise and learning to the development of the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan.

Overall, these country contexts highlight the range and levels of awareness and considered relevance of the LNOB Operational Plan.

For humanitarian action, most UNFPA colleagues are unfamiliar with, or unclear of, the difference between the LNOB Operational Plan and the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025.⁸² This evaluation actively prompted a review of the LNOB Operational Plan within humanitarian sections of UNFPA, in that Humanitarian Response Division respondents to this evaluation reviewed the LNOB Operational Plan specifically for the evaluation, and there is a sense that better dissemination would be helpful, as the Plan itself could be more effectively integrated into humanitarian advocacy work.⁸³ Where there is awareness of the LNOB Operational Plan among humanitarian staff, there is an understanding that it is extremely relevant to the mandate and work of UNFPA across the whole HDP continuum. Further, good practices do exist, with some country offices applying elements of the Operational Plan to strengthen inclusive programming and advocacy efforts, even in the absence of formal guidance (see Box 3). However, the LNOB Operational Plan is considered generic across the spectrum of contexts, which limits its practical implementation in humanitarian settings.⁸⁴

⁸¹ UNFPA Pakistan KII.

⁸² UNFPA humanitarian respondents at global, regional, and country levels.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Box 3: Good practice - Applying the LNOB Operational Plan in humanitarian settings – Afghanistan and Whole of Syria

In humanitarian contexts, UNFPA has taken steps to apply the principles of the LNOB Operational Plan to enhance accountability and inclusion in crisis response. A notable example is in Afghanistan, where the LNOB Operational Plan and accompanying guidance were used to inform the development of tailored protocols around accountability to affected populations (AAP). This application demonstrates how the LNOB framework can directly support principled humanitarian action by improving the responsiveness, relevance and dignity of services delivered to those furthest behind.

In the Whole of Syria response, LNOB principles have been operationalized through a series of “Voices” publications, which document UNFPA’s efforts to identify, reach and genuinely listen to individuals and communities at the margins. These publications showcase how insights gathered from those least visible are being used to shape more inclusive and effective programming.

Together, these examples reflect good practice in integrating LNOB into humanitarian action by aligning operational guidance with community accountability frameworks and prioritizing marginalized voices in response design.

Where there is awareness of the specific LNOB Operational Plan, there is support for the shift from groups to factors. This is, however, not without challenges. At the country level, groups are still the primary framing mechanism and language, even when references to intersectionality and layers of discrimination are clear.

The discussion around factors rather than groups as a framing for the UNFPA LNOB approach was an ongoing debate within the LNOB task team when developing the LNOB Operational Plan.⁸⁵ As far as this evaluation is aware, UNFPA is currently the only United Nations agency to conceptualize LNOB in this way, which presents leading good practice, but also highlights challenges with coherence with other United Nations and ‘One UN’ approaches.⁸⁶

The primary rationale for a focus on factors rather than groups was to elevate the concept of intersectionality. Dimensions of exclusion, vulnerability, discrimination and inequality are complex, and cannot be reduced to a single issue, so factors are inherently a more nuanced and meaningful way of understanding those who are left furthest behind in any given context. The factors selected by UNFPA in the Gender Plus approach are those that result in the most marginalization, exclusion and discrimination

⁸⁵ Global UNFPA KII.

⁸⁶ See findings under EQ 4, coherence, for a broader discussion of this.

for realizing the intent and objectives of the 1994 ICPD⁸⁷ and its subsequent agendas and plans of action.⁸⁸

Factors work at multiple levels to elucidate vulnerability. These factors are dynamic and can change over the course of a lifetime (for example, age, disability status, location and income) or in response to changing circumstances such as a humanitarian crisis or movement or displacement. Factors can change more readily than being a member of a 'group' and thus may not capture the full scope of an individual's evolving vulnerabilities.

Factors can also assist UNFPA in identifying root causes and therefore, theoretically, assist in designing and developing more transformative responses to address those root causes. An example provided by respondents in West and Central Africa illustrates the difference between viewing women and girls as a group versus understanding the various factors influencing their vulnerability. When viewing these women and girls as a group affected by female genital mutilation, the UNFPA response leans towards a relatively responsive prevention intervention. However, when considering the different factors that affect these women and girls – such as age, marital status, pregnancy, rural location and disabilities – a more transformative response can be developed. While female genital mutilation is generally considered to be a UNFPA programmatic intervention under gender and human rights programming, the perspective of factors makes it clear that it needs to also be a maternal health and newborn intervention, an adolescent and youth intervention, and even a data intervention that tracks the numbers, types and locations of female genital mutilation occurrence, and how health facilities supported by national, United Nations and non-government organizations map against those locations with the highest concentration of female genital mutilation survivors. The same of course is true for child marriage, which is also considered a gender and human rights intervention but, when viewed through the lens of factors, it becomes apparent that child marriage should be integrated across all UNFPA programme areas.⁸⁹

Another example provided by respondents in Eastern Europe and Central Asia pertains to the Roma population, who have long-since been considered as a 'group'. However, within this group, there are individuals with disabilities, those who are HIV positive, those who are rural versus those who are urban, those who are displaced, and others.⁹⁰ These factors are neither independent of each other nor static, and a perspective of factors rather than groups allows for an ongoing analysis of shifting socioeconomic dimensions that contribute to vulnerability or exclusion.

⁸⁷ UNFPA (n.d.). International Conference on Population and Development. About ICPD. <https://www.unfpa.org/icpd>.

⁸⁸ In addition to the foundational factor of gender, eight other factors are included, being: age; disability; culture, ethnicity, race, language and religion; location; income; migratory status; sexual and gender identity; and HIV/AIDS status. UNFPA (2021). Leaving No One Behind & Reaching the Furthest Behind: Strategic Plan 2022–2025.

⁸⁹ Regional UNFPA KIIs.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

However, a key challenge is that at the country level, there has been limited uptake of this factor-based approach, and the focus remains largely on groups. Planning is still strongly based on groups.^{91,92} While the conceptual rationale for the change is well founded, its limited applicability at the country level makes it less effective; if it is not useful at the country level, it becomes redundant. There are multiple barriers that have hindered the uptake of factors at the country level, both external and internal to UNFPA, which are summarized below.

External barriers

- The terminology of factors rather than groups can be cumbersome. It is much easier, and more understandable, to speak of persons with disabilities, for example, as a group, rather than describing individuals as those who experience discrimination or exclusion relating to disability.
- Other United Nations agencies still focus on groups and so the introduction of factors has led UNFPA further away from the common United Nations LNOB approach.

Both an external and internal barrier

- User-led civil society organizations, which are critical partners for UNFPA for reaching different populations identifying with different factors, are generally group-orientated. UNFPA works with several user-led civil society organizations already (youth-led organizations, women-led organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities, people of African descent-led organizations etc). The UNFPA civil society partnership strategy aims to foster more equal and transformative engagement with these organizations, moving beyond their role as mere implementers of UNFPA programmes. This strategy necessarily references the different groups of user-led civil society that UNFPA wants to work more with.⁹³

Internal barrier

- At the global level, UNFPA guidance is still framed very much as groups, with separate guidance, procedures and strategies for persons with disabilities, people of African descent, adolescents and youth etc. This division has led to confusion within the organization.

Ultimately, it is not 'either or', but rather both, when it comes to factors and groups. As one respondent highlighted: "This is a discussion of premises. Factors can't make groups unviable; they don't need to compete in any way." In the course of discussion on factors versus groups within UNFPA, the debate became quite binary, with an understanding that it is either one or the other. But there is no reason why UNFPA

⁹¹ Global, regional and country level UNFPA KIIs.

⁹² See more information below, in Finding 3.

⁹³ Global UNFPA KII.

cannot employ both factors and groups at the same time, using both or either as the context determines.

Finding 2: While the LNOB Operational Plan references key principles such as a human rights-based approach (HRBA), addressing inequality, and people-centred approaches, there remains insufficient clarity on the linkages across these concepts. This has hindered a coherent understanding of the Plan's application in conjunction with these concepts.⁹⁴

Links to assumption 1.1

The LNOB Operational Plan includes references to HRBA, marginalization and vulnerability, positioning LNOB as a strategic priority for UNFPA. It also recognizes HRBA as a crucial tool, especially in addressing discrimination and empowering marginalized populations. Respondents noted the need for greater effort to connect LNOB with key concepts like HRBA, vulnerability, exclusion and marginalization, which are core to UNFPA's work. While the Plan makes clear that HRBA and LNOB align conceptually, the relationship between HRBA, LNOB and other related concepts is not sufficiently defined. Given that HRBA is enshrined in international legal frameworks and holds governments accountable, this lack of clarity is significant.

Specifically, there is no clear articulation of the causal relationships between the concepts of LNOB, HRBA, equality, vulnerability and exclusion. For example, does LNOB (or RFB) contribute to achieving equality? Is addressing vulnerability essential for achieving LNOB? Is addressing exclusion key to reducing vulnerability? Clarifying these relationships, and defining the actions, outputs, outcomes and ultimate goals, would strengthen the overall LNOB Operational Plan.

Some respondents also suggested that clarifying these linkages would provide more flexibility in framing issues within different contexts. For example, framing exclusion for certain groups on the grounds of inequality, diversity, or human rights may, in some contexts, make it easier to advocate for, respond to, and engage with groups such as LGBTQIA+ and others. Respondents highlighted that discussions on key population groups, or reproductive rights, should be linked to LNOB if UNFPA is committed to understanding LNOB factors through the lens of the ICPD framework. However, in some contexts, it may be more suitable to approach these issues through the lens of exclusion or vulnerability, rather than LNOB.⁹⁵

For humanitarian action, there are strong linkages between LNOB and humanitarian principles, humanitarian access, and key programmatic and operational concepts such

⁹⁴ Refer to Findings 9 and 12 for additional information.

⁹⁵ Global and regional level UNFPA KIIs.

as accountability to affected populations, localization, and a ‘no regrets’ policy.⁹⁶ These linkages, however, are not reflected in the LNOB Operational Plan, which limits the Plan’s relevance in humanitarian situations.⁹⁷

Some of these principles do also have relevance outside of strict humanitarian operations. Humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – can be hard to argue against in any setting. Accountability to affected populations is a humanitarian phraseology for community engagement, and localization is a concept already well-understood across both development and humanitarian settings. Incorporating more humanitarian language and principles within the LNOB Operational Plan could enhance its relevance within humanitarian settings, while also improving its understanding and application in development settings, thereby strengthening the HDP continuum approach.

Finding 3: In upper middle-income countries, the relevance of LNOB is clear for achieving the three transformative results. However, in contexts where there are particularly high needs, including within humanitarian settings, UNFPA finds the applicability of LNOB less easily evident.⁹⁸

Links to assumption 1.3

In middle-income settings, the value of LNOB to achieving the three transformative results –and, by extension, Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 5—is clear. In these contexts, LNOB remains a central objective under UNFPA’s current strategic direction. Conversely, in settings where maternal mortality, limited access to family planning, and widespread gender-based violence and harmful practices affect the population more broadly, the specific application of LNOB is less evident.

In both contexts, geographical targeting is a commonality across all UNFPA countries when it comes to identifying and reaching those left furthest behind.⁹⁹ For service delivery interventions, priority subnational areas, be they districts, regions or communities, are selected based on poverty datasets and specific UNFPA areas of interest, such as maternal mortality rates, child marriage rates and contraceptive prevalence rates. In some countries, where data are available, UNFPA might then consider other factors – ethnicity, disability etc – with regard to the furthest behind concerning the three transformative results.¹⁰⁰ In this respect, across UNFPA regions

⁹⁶ Findings 9 and 10 provide a detailed discussion of how understanding vulnerability is embedded in the humanitarian response under, specifically, the effectiveness of UNFPA’s LNOB approach in humanitarian settings.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, and all thematic and country case studies.

⁹⁹ The evaluation notes that in many contexts UNFPA has a strong normative role with regard to LNOB, and quite transformative approaches to supporting an increasingly enabling environment, and this will be explored more in findings under EQ 4.

¹⁰⁰ Country level UNFPA KIIs.

and countries, vulnerability is commonly assessed at a geographical level using these indicators to identify areas that are furthest from achieving the three transformative results, and therefore furthest from achieving SDGs 3 and 5.¹⁰¹

However, beyond this common geographical targeting, a clear difference between UMIC settings and low-income country settings emerge in terms of how the LNOB approach is applied.

- **UMIC and low fertility settings:** There is consensus across UNFPA in UMIC in the Asia and Pacific, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions that, while countries often have relatively strong universal health and protection systems with progress on maternal mortality and family planning indicators generally on track, the LNOB approach remains essential for fully achieving UNFPA's three transformative results. This is because inequalities – particularly among vulnerable subgroups (for example, ethnic minorities, older populations, persons with disabilities) – persist both within and between countries in these regions. However, demographic shifts, such as population aging and declining birth rates remain more pressing issues than maternal mortality and unmet needs for family planning for national governments in UMIC contexts.

Regional programme evaluations in both Eastern Europe and Central Asia and Asia and Pacific emphasize that aligning regional and national priorities with UNFPA's three transformative results is becoming increasingly challenging, particularly as demographic changes (for example, aging populations) shift the focus away from traditional family planning and maternal health issues.¹⁰² In these regions, UNFPA's normative role requires country offices to adapt and advocate for LNOB in ways that align with emerging demographic concerns – an area that still requires further conceptualization from UNFPA. Accordingly, in both the Eastern Europe and Central Asia and Asia and Pacific regions, UNFPA is actively reframing family planning narratives through a gender-sensitive lens to address demographic shifts. At the same time, UNFPA recognizes that these shifts could pose challenges to progress on its three transformative results, particularly in ensuring that vulnerable populations (such as the elderly and persons with disabilities) are not left behind in the process.¹⁰³

There is limited evidence on how UNFPA is integrating LNOB into lifecycle or demographic resilience approaches, which are relevant to UMIC in low-fertility contexts in both regions. An exception is an emerging narrative that economic and

¹⁰¹ Regional and country level UNFPA KIIs. Specifically for linkages to SDGs: SDG 3 good health and well-being: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. UNFPA efforts link specifically to target 3.1, reduce maternal mortality; and target 3.7 universal access to sexual and reproductive care, family planning and education. SDG 5 gender equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. UNFPA efforts link specifically target 5.2, end all violence against and exploitation of women and girls, target 5.3 eliminate forced marriages and genital mutilation; and target 5.6 universal access to reproductive health and rights.

¹⁰² UNFPA (2024). Regional Programme Evaluation for Asia Pacific Regional Office (APRO) and UNFPA (2024). Regional Programme Evaluation for Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (EECARO).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

labour force inclusion of some groups, such as persons with disabilities, migrants and older persons, can provide a solution in countries with declining populations.¹⁰⁴

- **Low income, fragile states and humanitarian¹⁰⁵ contexts:** Conversely, across low income and fragile and conflict-affected states almost everyone can be considered 'left behind'. Within the West and Central Africa region, there is an understanding that almost everyone within the region is left behind, and this is true when compared to global indicators. Certainly, most women and adolescent girls are left behind when looking at maternal mortality rates, contraceptive prevalence rates, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and access to education, among other issues. This raises the question of whether prioritizing those who are the furthest behind – often the most difficult and costly to reach – is the best approach, given the widespread needs across the region, and reaching those not quite the furthest behind could potentially allow for broader impact. This remains an ongoing question for West and Central Africa.¹⁰⁶ As one respondent said: "How do we focus on LNOB when the basics are not in place?"¹⁰⁷ This highlights a particular tension with regard to low-income countries and how far they are from their Sustainable Development Goal targets, particularly those linked to the three transformative results. UNFPA's role is to improve indicators as much as possible, and in these particular contexts, the improvement comes from reaching as many people as possible, not just focusing on those furthest behind.

This challenge is also present for humanitarian contexts, where the majority of the population, rather than a minority, is in desperate need and considered 'left behind'. In these settings, a geographical understanding of who is left behind is more relevant than a population-based approach, which the LNOB Operational Plan does not fully address. LNOB in humanitarian settings must take into consideration the sheer number of people and ratios of the population who are increasingly in need. For example, over half the population in Sudan is affected by malnutrition,¹⁰⁸ the entire population of Gaza is in urgent need of assistance. The LNOB Operational Plan does not explicitly address these issues.

In humanitarian settings, the interconnected nature of the three transformative results is often more pronounced. An increased lack of access to family planning, a decreased access to health facilities and an increased prevalence of gender-based violence directly contribute to higher rates of unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and maternal mortality. Moreover, UNFPA humanitarian staff face challenges with the cautious language used by UNFPA when addressing women's

¹⁰⁴ UNFPA (2024). Regional Programme Evaluation for Asia Pacific Regional Office (APRO) and UNFPA (2024). Regional Programme Evaluation for Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (EECARO).

¹⁰⁵ See Findings 9 and 10 for further focused reflections on the effectiveness of LNOB within UNFPA humanitarian action.

¹⁰⁶ Regional UNFPA KIIs.

¹⁰⁷ Regional UNFPA KII.

¹⁰⁸ Norwegian Refugee Council (2024). Sudan crisis: People are dying of hunger. <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2024/sudan-crisis-people-are-dying-of-hunger>.

reproductive rights.¹⁰⁹ For all three transformative results, the humanitarian focus is on response, rather than driving long-term transformative changes, such as shifting social norms, even although this is particularly important for protracted conflict and emergencies and aligned with the HDP continuum approach.¹¹⁰ LNOB, and a commitment to addressing root causes of vulnerability, inequality and exclusion remain critical despite donor funding streams often typically prioritizing ‘life-saving’ interventions, which necessarily must focus on immediate needs.¹¹¹

It is furthermore necessary to understand from which level LNOB is being considered. The fact that the role of LNOB and UNFPA-led ICPD is extremely clear in UMICs and less so in low-income countries and fragile and conflict-affected states, highlights a particular challenge of the concept of LNOB: it must be understood at different levels, as it is inherently comparative. At the global level, it is possible to see entire geographic regions (for example, West and Central Africa) as being left behind compared to other regions, when looking at poverty, health, equality and educational indicators. Similarly, within a particular region, some countries can be viewed as being left behind compared to others. Within a country, likewise, some subnational regions or districts will be left behind compared to others. Trying to have a consistent understanding of LNOB is therefore not possible without first understanding from which level UNFPA is approaching LNOB.



¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Norwegian Refugee Council (2024). Sudan crisis: People are dying of hunger. <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2024/sudan-crisis-people-are-dying-of-hunger>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Reflections on this issue are provided in more detail under Finding 6.

4.2 Evaluation question 2: Effectiveness and sustainability

To what extent has the LNOB Operational Plan been effectively operationalized at country, regional and global levels?¹¹²

Feminist principles applied: participatory and inclusive approach, centring and prioritizing the perspectives of those most left behind.

Finding 4: The principles and ethos of LNOB are largely incorporated across UNFPA programming, in both planning and implementation, and across different contexts and levels, but there is limited evidence that this is driven by the LNOB Operational Plan itself.¹¹³

Links to assumptions 2.1 and 2.2

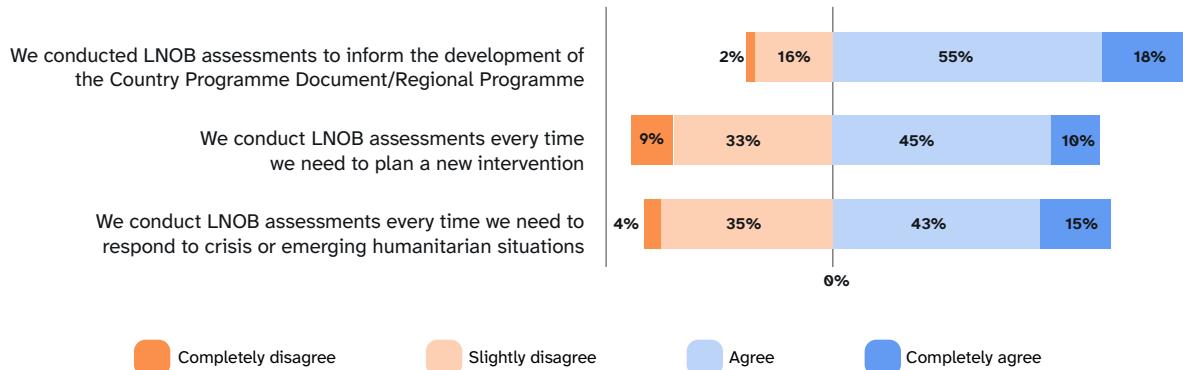
Evidence from this evaluation shows a clear, although somewhat uneven, systematic application of LNOB principles. In the online survey and across all countries reviewed within this evaluation (the three country case studies, the three countries included in the Latin America and Caribbean case study, and countries included in the UMIC and low fertility thematic paper and the humanitarian paper), there is evidence that the LNOB perspective has been largely integrated into programmatic planning documents, and a clear positioning of furthest-behind factors in those documents is increasingly being acknowledged as an important enabler for reaching the furthest behind at the country level.

Figure 10 and Figure 11 below highlight the online evaluation survey responses regarding LNOB practices at the country office level.

112 Evaluation Question 2- Assumptions: 2.1 The fundamental shifts and principles within the LNOB Operational Plan have been consistently understood and meaningfully incorporated into planning at regional and country levels; 2.2 The LNOB Operational Plan has been meaningfully operationalized at country, regional and global levels, across the six output areas of (a) policy and accountability; (2) quality of care and services; (3) gender and social norms; (4) population change and data; (5) humanitarian action; (6) adolescents and youth; 2.3 LNOB has been fully leveraged as an accelerator and has been linked to other accelerators, across country, regional and global levels, where alignment exists, being (a) human rights-based approach; (b) partnerships; (c) digitalization and innovation; (d) data and evidence; and (e) HDP continuum; 2.4 UNFPA has, across country, regional and global levels, identified and implemented mitigation measures for the external barriers to effective LNOB programming, being: (a) competing priorities for resources; (b) lack of quality disaggregated data; (c) unfavourable political environment; (d) unfavourable socioeconomic context; (e) lack of available partners; (f) concept of LNOB is complex and context-specific; 2.5 UNFPA meaningfully engages with, works with, and listens to, organizations led by representatives of left-behind groups at country, regional and global levels.

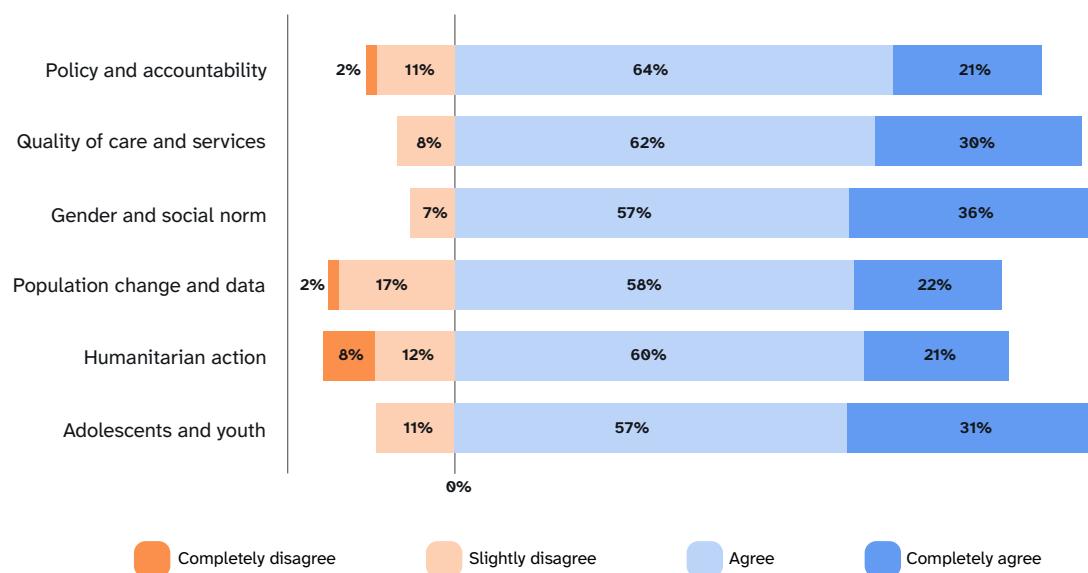
113 Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, and all thematic and country case studies.

Figure 10: Conducting LNOB assessments



Source: Evaluation online survey results (question 2).

Figure 11: LNOB across different output areas



Source: Evaluation online survey results (question 5).

LNOB is one of the criteria for the country programme review and approval process, under the dimension of “Programming Principles”, and it is also included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) development guidance, where, for each outcome, the UNSDCF is expected to incorporate LNOB, explaining which groups of people stand to benefit from United Nations support to the outcome and how this is expected to happen.¹¹⁴ This is aligned with UNFPA’s internal planning, through country programme documents.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ United Nations Sustainable Development Group (2019). United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework - Internal Guidance.

¹¹⁵ All CPDs reviewed for this evaluation (see Bibliography in Volume II, Annex IX).

While there is limited evidence that the LNOB Operational Plan has been consistently applied across all levels, there are notable examples. At the global level, the comprehensive sexuality education programme is a good example. Across multiple countries, comprehensive sexuality education has an increasing focus on out-of-school youth, a key demographic group with shared factors of exclusion (lack of education) but with differing access to technology and services across different countries, and so the other factors (rural versus urban etc) need to be considered within each context. Within this overarching group, there will be both male, female, LGBTQIA+ individuals, those with disabilities, those living with HIV etc., which provide additional multidimensional factors of possible increased exclusion. A strong example of this approach at the regional level is the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) programme in West and Central Africa, which demonstrates how intersectional targeting and data-informed planning can be used to reach adolescent girls and young women who face compounded vulnerabilities (see Box 4).¹¹⁶

Box 4: Good practice - Advancing intersectional targeting in West and Central Africa

The Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) programme provides a strong example of how LNOB principles can be operationalized through intersectional targeting and data-informed geographic prioritization at the regional level. Led by UNFPA and implemented across ten countries in West and Central Africa, SWEDD focuses on addressing the compounded exclusion of adolescent girls and young women, particularly where gender and age intersect with other factors of marginalization.

The programme is built around three core intervention pillars: rights and empowerment of women and girls; education and school retention, particularly for adolescent girls; and economic inclusion and empowerment. Targeting is conducted using ICPD-based indicators at the regional level and is further refined through household surveys, community-level data, and geographic vulnerability assessments. This multi-level targeting enables country programmes to identify and reach the most vulnerable girls, tailoring interventions to specific national and subnational contexts.

By grounding its design in intersectional analysis and context-specific data, SWEDD exemplifies how regional initiatives can go beyond demographic generalizations to effectively reach those furthest behind. The programme also demonstrates the value of cross-country collaboration, policy alignment, and evidence-based planning in advancing gender equity and the LNOB agenda across diverse and complex settings.

The application of intersectionality is also demonstrated at the country level.

Türkiye offers a strong example, where reaching furthest-behind groups with sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence services, information and support

is a distinctive area of focus for UNFPA – particularly in humanitarian emergencies. Targeted approaches, through tailored service units and health mediators or outreach workers, ensure quality and accessible service provision to a wide range of furthest-behind groups. Respondents articulated a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of legal and registration status for refugees and how this restricts mobility and access to services and assistance. While these factors affect all refugees in some way, particularly vulnerable or at-risk refugees, such as those living with HIV, face added barriers and protection risks, which require comprehensive support; not just health services, but also legal and protection services. Protection monitoring reports published by UNFPA have also presented a comprehensive analysis of factors driving exclusion of at-risk refugees,^{117,118,119} including references to how gender norms and patriarchal systems are linked to transphobia and homophobia,¹²⁰ which also intersect with xenophobia and racism for those who are refugees and migrants.¹²¹

In terms of disability inclusion, UNFPA has demonstrated steady progress towards meeting the targets set by the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS). In 2024, UNFPA met or exceeded the required standards for 14 out of 16 indicators related to disability inclusion, reflecting continuous improvement across the organization. This progress indicates that disability inclusion is becoming more deeply integrated into UNFPA's programming at the global, regional and country levels, further advancing the broader objective of reaching the furthest behind.

Questions remain as to how UNFPA can best support more consistent translation of the LNOB commitment into practice. For many staff within UNFPA at regional and country levels, a gap remains in terms of guidance to translate the rhetoric into practice.¹²² Few respondents were aware of the prioritization tool provided by headquarters, most had not heard of it. Those who had seen it, felt that it was too bulky and cumbersome to be a practical tool at the country level.¹²³ At the global level, there is some awareness of the need to ensure that tools used by regional offices and country offices are practical and pragmatic, context-focused and easy to use, but at the same time, with the capacity to collect the data necessary to genuinely understand who is left behind, as defined with the UNFPA ICPD-lens focus.¹²⁴ While uptake of the LNOB Operational Plan has been limited and uneven, many offices demonstrated strong alignment with LNOB principles through other entry points – such as country

¹¹⁷ UNFPA (2020). Key Refugee Groups in Turkey: General Overview. UNFPA Protection Monitoring Report No. 1.

¹¹⁸ UNFPA (2020). Vulnerable Refugee Groups in Turkey: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Survivors. UNFPA Protection Monitoring Report No. 3.

¹¹⁹ UNFPA (2021). Trans Refugees in Turkey: UNFPA Protection Monitoring Report No. 4.

¹²⁰ UNFPA (2020). Vulnerable Refugee Groups in Turkey: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Survivors. UNFPA Protection Monitoring Report No. 3.

¹²¹ UNFPA (2020). Key Refugee Groups in Turkey: General Overview. UNFPA Protection Monitoring Report No. 1.

¹²² UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

¹²³ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

¹²⁴ UNFPA global KIIs.

frameworks, regional strategies, etc – suggesting that, despite gaps in the practical tools and limited awareness of institutional framework, the LNOB commitment is being internalized and applied through multiple, context-driven entry points across the organization.

Concerns further remain about how to implement LNOB when needs are significant and overwhelming across population groups. Particularly in West and Central Africa, there are key concerns about the sheer numbers of those left behind when applying global-level criteria – girls subject to female genital mutilation and child marriage, for example – and what that means for programming where needs are so vast that reducing reach by focusing on the furthest behind seems problematic.¹²⁵

One key factor is that genuine LNOB requires significant localization. A global plan is useful, but the utility is limited without adaptation to local contexts. LNOB means understanding, in depth, the local and contextualized factors that allow people to access their economic, social and cultural rights,¹²⁶ and their civil and political rights. It then requires an analysis of ICPD factors upon which UNFPA's conceptualization of LNOB is founded. And finally, it requires an honest assessment of what data are available across those factors, and what is not, and, within the available data, which data are reliable and which are not. There is also the question of what to do when existing data are not sufficient to make informed decisions on who is most left behind. All support from UNFPA headquarters and regional- to country-level operations must then be tailored to that particular context, dictated by various and evolving dimensions.

LNOB intrinsically looks different in different contexts, and the challenge for UNFPA is to have global consistency of approach with country-level flexibility of adaptation. The factors and groups approach, if explained and disseminated in a coherent way, would potentially do this, but the binary 'either or' nature of how UNFPA has to date conceptualized LNOB has prevented this.

Finding 5: LNOB principles are integrated throughout UNFPA programming, most commonly through responsive programming, with fewer examples of transformative approaches.¹²⁷

Links to assumption 2.2

The evaluation design incorporated a conceptual LNOB continuum—modeled after the gender equality scale—to assess whether UNFPA's approaches could be considered harmful, neutral, responsive, or transformative. The focus was placed particularly on identifying responsive and transformative examples (see Figure 6 in the methodology section).

125 UNFPA West and Central Africa Regional Office, regional KII.

126 OHCHR (n.d.). Economic, social and cultural rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/economic-social-cultural-rights>.

127 Evidence comes from thematic and country case studies.

However, applying this continuum proved challenging in practice, and the evaluation was not able to collect examples as systematically as initially anticipated. This finding presents the examples and insights that were identified and coded as responsive or transformative, based on the global document review and all thematic and country case studies.

LNOB responsive and transformative programming are closely linked, as both are critical for addressing underlying structural inequalities and creating sustainable change. While UNFPA's programming successfully integrates LNOB principles, there is a growing desire and need for more transformative approaches that go beyond addressing immediate needs to focus on systemic change.

In the UMIC and low fertility case study, respondents from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Asia and Pacific regions clearly articulated both a need and a desire for a more transformative approach, with an understanding of the root causes of exclusion and the importance of addressing underlying drivers and shifts in social norms. However, UNFPA staff also highlighted that UNFPA is not fully equipped to operationalize such a transformative approach in a comprehensive manner. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, UNFPA's engagement with diverse regional networks is notable, including with transgender groups, women and young people living with HIV, persons with disabilities and men who have sex with men.¹²⁸ Additionally, it was reported that the regional office had shifted from targeted regional events for persons with disabilities to incorporating disability inclusion into all its regional events. In Asia and Pacific, the regional programme evaluation found that UNFPA and its partners acknowledge the transformative role of civil society in supporting normative work.¹²⁹ However, the case study could not retrieve specific examples of regional engagement with organizations led by persons with disabilities. At the country level in China, as part of the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) theme group, UNFPA China engages with the China Disabled Persons' Federation. The strong regional partnerships with groups led by faith-based organizations and the shift from implementing partners to meaningful partnerships reflect feminist principles and potentially supports a more transformative approach to development.

Across the three countries included in this evaluation, there are some limited examples of transformative programming but, more consistently, a genuine desire to implement more transformative programming with recognition of the barriers to, and the challenges in, doing so.¹³⁰

As a key example, in Pakistan, non-governmental and civil society organization implementing partners focus on service delivery and this provides a good achievement of LNOB and RFB at service implementation level; however, LNOB in the true sense and in a systematic and transformative manner is still a missing piece of the puzzle.

¹²⁸ KII UNFPA, UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and T. Khomasuridze (2022). Digital survey access barriers to comprehensive FP services in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Leaving no one behind.

¹²⁹ UNFPA (2024). Asia and Pacific Regional Programme Evaluation.

¹³⁰ See country case studies for more information. (Volume III).

UNFPA Pakistan staff and the implementing partners both understand that for more transformative work to take place, a few things need to happen, including: (1) civil society organization partners need to be more equal and have more constant engagement during the policy-making process and design phase; and (2) civil society organization partners need to be better sensitized to promote diversity and inclusion.¹³¹ In Pakistan, normative work supporting the Government is strong, with examples of how UNFPA has achieved potentially transformative and definitively sustainable results in terms of slowly and gradually creating an increasingly enabling environment for those left furthest behind. However, examples of UNFPA support to the policy environment with weak, limited, or non-existent references to LNOB remains, and this area could be strengthened with a more intentional and consistent effort.

For humanitarian action, there is some level of evidence of transformative approaches around engagement and mobilization of men and boys to achieve gender equality and ‘building back better’ approaches. However, UNFPA’s humanitarian action mostly has LNOB embedded within a service provision-orientated, responsive approach in acute emergencies, and is then merged to a greater extent with development actions in the more protracted emergencies, linking to the HDP continuum and acting as an accelerator. Humanitarian responses at immediate phases of crises are generally responsive, so the transformative action comes from working across the HDP continuum in protracted crises, in three distinct but related ways:

1. Seeking to ensure that even if progression on transformative action (such as gender equality overall and reduction of stigma and discrimination for marginalized persons) cannot be achieved, work will still be carried out to ensure that regression can be prevented;
2. Seeking to build back better in terms of social norms in the same way that humanitarian action intends to build back better infrastructure after destruction;
3. Understanding the opportunities afforded by a crisis where many social norms and expectations are suspended and leveraging any improvements for marginalized persons to embed within the future emerging society.

Humanitarian action in acute emergencies leans towards a more responsive provision of services, for all who are affected and for those who are most vulnerable, most marginalized and, to use humanitarian terminology, ‘most in need’. A focus on life-saving responses tends to halt, suspend or ignore transformative approaches such as male engagement. Transformative impact in humanitarian crises is often viewed not so much in terms of advancement, but rather in terms of preventing regression. However, when speaking of the HDP continuum working, transformative action comes into play much more. There are clear examples of UNFPA work here in more protracted situations, such as social norm programming in Syria.

¹³¹ UNFPA Pakistan and implementing partner KII.

Overall, there is clear, if limited, evidence of some key transformative efforts being made within UNFPA LNOB approaches. It is also important to note that transformative programming is an important aspiration, but equally important is the gender-responsive work that is rooted in practical, context-driven strategies that allow for tangible progress and can lead to broader systemic transformation over time, examples of which are evident across all evaluation case studies.

Finding 6: LNOB is clearly understood and valued as an accelerator towards the three transformative results, although its full potential could be further enhanced through leveraging linkages with other accelerators.¹³²

Links to assumption 2.3

LNOB is recognized and valued as an accelerator. Within the UMIC and low fertility thematic case study it is evident that LNOB as an accelerator has been largely integrated into the Asia and Pacific and Eastern Europe and Central Asia regional programme documents¹³³ and the country programme documents reviewed.¹³⁴ This aligns with the general tendency previously noted by both the strategic plan mid-term review and the strategic plan evaluation,¹³⁵ which showed a high degree of LNOB integration into country programme documents when compared to other accelerators. However, the extent to which LNOB has been meaningfully operationalized as an accelerator varies across the two regions. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, respondents noted that LNOB has consistently been a priority within the (mainly middle-income country) region, where programming focuses on bridging gaps and reaching the most vulnerable populations.¹³⁶ In contrast, in Asia and Pacific, an understanding of the conceptual and operational implications of an LNOB approach, particularly as an accelerator, is still a work in progress.¹³⁷

In Latin America and the Caribbean, LNOB is clearly recognized as an accelerator, especially in contexts where targeting the furthest behind can potentially contribute to improving indicators. From a regional perspective, differences among and within

132 Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIIs and document review, both thematic case studies and two country case studies.

133 UNFPA (2023). Asia and Pacific Regional Programme Action Plan 2022-2025. Mid-Term Review Report. UNFPA (2023). EECA Regional Programme Action Plan 2022-2025. Mid-Term Review Report.

134 UNFPA (2021). Country programme document for Albania 2022 -2026. UNFPA (2020). Country programme document for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021-2025. UNFPA (2020). Country programme document for North Macedonia 2021-2025. UNFPA (2022). Country programme document for Moldova 2021-2025. UNFPA (2020). Country programme document for China 2021-2025. UNFPA (2021). Country programme document for Thailand 2022-2026. UNFPA (2022). Country programme document for the Islamic Republic of Iran 2023-2027.

135 UNFPA (2023). Midterm Review of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. UNFPA (2024). Independent Evaluation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

136 UNFPA (2024). EECA Regional Programme Evaluation.

137 UNFPA (2024). AP Regional Programme Evaluation.

countries are being taken into account, linking with the discussion around the concept of LNOB as an accelerator. In that regard, understanding both absolute numbers and specific ratios within the broader context of health disparities is crucial for guiding targeted efforts. For example, at the regional level, a few countries account for the largest share of maternal mortality in absolute numbers, while in other countries, the ratios may be much higher, albeit with smaller absolute figures. On the other hand, at the country level, certain groups may represent a small percentage of the population and yet account for a disproportionately high share of maternal deaths. One example given was of Paraguay, where indigenous peoples, despite constituting only 2 per cent of the population, account for 33 per cent of maternal deaths, and with a need for focused interventions that are both targeted and cost-effective.^{138,139}

For humanitarian action, there are examples of the use of the LNOB accelerator at the country level across West and Central Africa and Arab States, one being in Sudan where the LNOB accelerator has been explicitly selected and implemented as a foundation for targeting (geographically) areas most in need, based primarily on maternal mortality statistics.¹⁴⁰ For humanitarian response, the links between the LNOB and the HDP continuum accelerators are particularly evident. One key facet of this though, is that in many humanitarian crises, the only goal that can realistically be met is the prevention of regression rather than the achievement of progression. This links to the HRBA accelerator: instead of changing social norms for the better, often the only feasible option is to work to prevent any reversing of progress made to date.¹⁴¹ In some contexts, however, even in complex and high-threat environments, UNFPA has been able to promote LNOB as an accelerator, linked to changing gender and social norms. For example, in northwest Syria there is increasing work with men and religious leaders.¹⁴² But this work is sporadic, inconsistent and, importantly, difficult to find other resources for, and not often provided for by UNFPA core resources. A key issue, relevant to the HDP continuum accelerator, is an increasing, but still nascent focus on LNOB and megatrends, particularly climate change. In the Arab States region, a region fully immersed in the effects of climate change, some country offices are trying to understand LNOB factors within the framing of climate-affected persons, which links strongly to the HDP continuum perspectives of LNOB, that is, understanding those most at risk of being impacted by climate-induced crises.¹⁴³

Linkages of accelerators

Examples of linkages of accelerators were noted in Pakistan and Uganda. In Pakistan there are ongoing efforts to link LNOB with both the data accelerator and other accelerators, such as digitalization and innovation, and human rights-based approaches,

138 UNFPA KIIs.

139 UNFPA (2024). LACRO, accelerating action towards the 3 transformative results in LAC. Leaving No One Behind to Get to Zero (PPT).

140 KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian at regional and country levels.

141 Ibid.

142 Ibid.

143 UNFPA ASRO KIIs.

such as data collected through the telemedicine centres set up to reach the hardest-to-reach populations.¹⁴⁴ In Uganda, respondents confirmed that digitalization was a way to reach more people who were furthest behind.¹⁴⁵ Across interviews, there was some understanding as to how digitalization can actually create a bigger divide, and indeed create a new factor of LNOB, which is a lack of access to the digital world.¹⁴⁶ For example, in the Arab States region, there are ongoing discussions around how the digital divide is likely to further marginalize women, and how LNOB intersects with the digital divide for out-of-school adolescents and youth.

Despite the examples above, multiple respondents across all global and regional interviews for this evaluation report that, where there has been a limited focus on connections across different accelerators, this has likely limited the potential of LNOB to be integrated into all aspects of UNFPA's work. The siloing of accelerators fails to allow the clear cause-and-effect and symbiotic interconnections of each of the accelerators. In general, there is a sense across UNFPA respondents that linkages across the accelerators of the current Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (which are: (a) HRBA; (b) innovation and digitalization; (c) partnerships and South-South and triangular cooperation; (d) data and evidence; (e) LNOB; and (f) HDP continuum have not been fully leveraged.¹⁴⁷

Even though the HRBA accelerator and the LNOB accelerator are clearly linked, and noting that the teams have come together under one unit since 2024, nothing specific has been implemented to ensure alignment with these two accelerators. The accelerators are logical and therefore, intuitively, the application of them should accelerate progress towards achieving the three transformative results. However, limited indicators to effectively monitor both the application and the results attributable to the application of these accelerators, coupled with no clear guidance on how to integrate them in practice, makes it difficult to assess whether the intended synergies are being achieved and whether the accelerators are driving meaningful progress toward the three transformative results. While there is a rational belief that applying these accelerators together will drive progress, there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate their collective impact.¹⁴⁸

The lack of both conceptual and practical guidance as to how these accelerators all interlink is a clear gap in supporting the application and measurement of the accelerators at the country level. At the global level, the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 does speak to how the accelerators are interlinked, and countries are encouraged to use all accelerators together. Within the partnerships section, UNFPA has a clear idea of how LNOB fits into the concept of partnerships, and there is an increasing focus on partnerships with women-led, youth-led, and other LNOB group-led civil society

¹⁴⁴ UNFPA ASRO KIIs.

¹⁴⁵ UNFPA country level KII.

¹⁴⁶ UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIs.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ UNFPA global KIIs.

organizations. However, at the country level, beyond the examples provided above, LNOB seems to be quite a standalone concept in several countries in both design (for example, country programme documents) and actual implementation of programming, and it is normally delinked from digitalization, HRBA and the HDP continuum, or partnerships.¹⁴⁹

Finding 7: The key external barriers to implementing LNOB identified by UNFPA across multiple contexts include a shrinking civil space, political sensitivities, and a lack of data, with some examples of mitigation measures identified and implemented.¹⁵⁰

Links to assumption 2.4

Unfavourable political environments and shrinking civil society space are key external barriers to LNOB. These challenges are inherently linked. In some contexts, a rise in conservative political rhetoric, which focuses on more ‘traditional’ family values and less on inclusivity, is often linked to limitations on civil society’s ability to operate, particularly for organizations that are user-led or representative of marginalized groups.

Within the survey conducted for this evaluation, respondents reported the unfavourable political environment, the unfavourable socioeconomic context, and a lack of disaggregated data as the most important barriers, as shown in Figure 12.

The unfavourable political environment was acknowledged by UNFPA in its ‘Strategic Plan Annex 2 Change Stories’. It highlights the **shrinking civil society space** as a concerning barrier, and this is strongly confirmed as an increasing challenge by respondents to this evaluation.¹⁵¹ Many respondents at regional and country levels highlighted the less than conducive environments within which UNFPA works as a barrier to advocacy for those left furthest behind.¹⁵²

It is also clearly referenced in the LNOB Operational Plan, which allows for the option for some regional offices to “remain silent on some factors where political sensitivities mean that including them would be counterproductive or impose serious risks of repercussions” and appreciates that “there are political risks in assigning higher priority to RFB factors and that well-considered trade-offs and risks will be needed to make progress.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ UNFPA global KIIs.

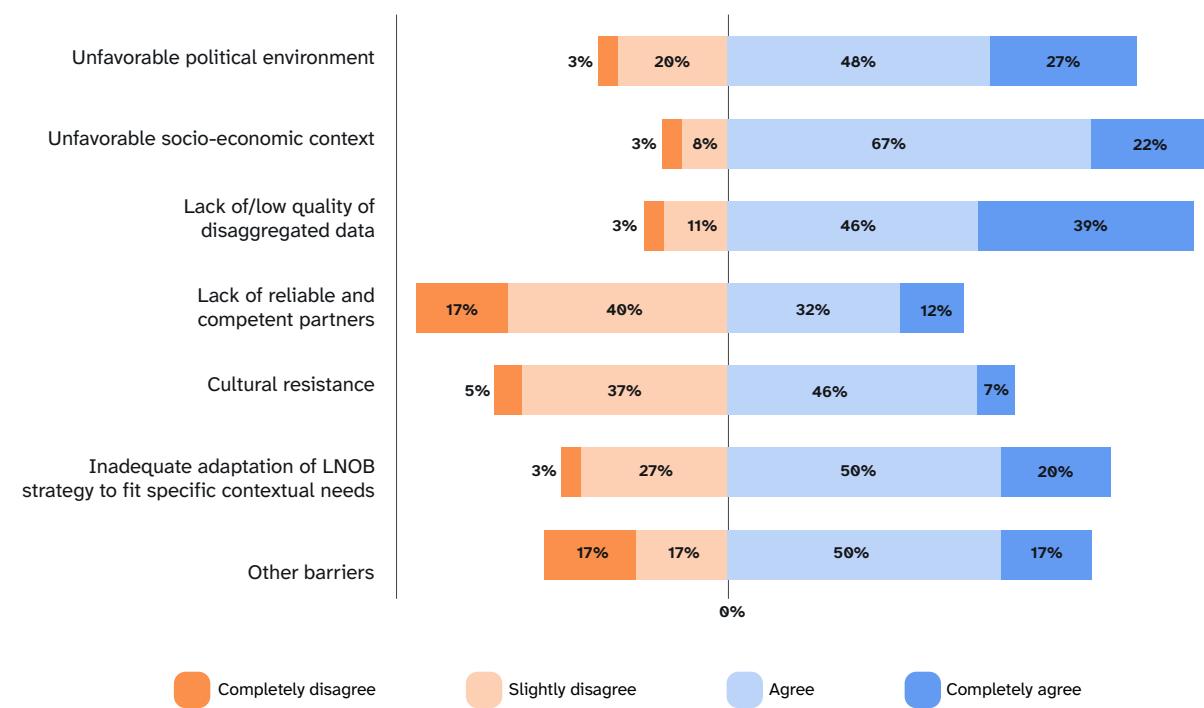
¹⁵⁰ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, both thematic case studies and two country case studies.

¹⁵¹ UNFPA (2021). Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 2. Change stories to accelerate the achievement of the three transformative results.

¹⁵² UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

¹⁵³ UNFPA (2021). Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

Figure 12: Survey respondents' views on external barriers



Source: Evaluation survey results (question 6).

Some feel that UNFPA could strengthen its advocacy and visibility in this area, and by adjusting its approach, these barriers could serve as a clear indication of the need for UNFPA to expand its efforts to reach and support those most left behind. As one respondent said:

“For me, I don’t think there are any barriers. If we say that we are an human rights based organisation, then we have to do it. Rather I see [LNOB] as a facilitator. It helps you to check your boxes on the work that you are doing.”¹⁵⁴

Across all levels of UNFPA, there was support for taking a stronger and more vocal stance in defending the rights of the most vulnerable. This means expanding advocacy efforts beyond areas that are traditionally more widely accepted, such as disability inclusion, and strongly advocating for the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals, migrants, sex workers and youth, – defending their access to essential services and reproductive rights. While this presents significant challenges, it is a necessary step when connecting LNOB to an HRBA agenda and upholding the vision of ICPD. An alternative perspective is that UNFPA is consistently working to advance rights-based agendas, while maintaining constructive relationships with governments, which is essential for preserving civil society space and allowing diverse voices to be heard. This approach is often pursued through quiet diplomacy rather than vocal opposition.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ UNFPA country KII.

¹⁵⁵ UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIs.

The ideal vision, of course, is identifying, understanding and maintaining the right balance between these two approaches in each different and continually shifting context. There is no guidance provided on achieving this balance.¹⁵⁶

At the country level, these barriers play out in different ways. In Malawi, for example, the political sensitivities link to a lack of addressing harmful social norms although some good practices have been recorded in the engagement of men and boys, and traditional leaders, and advocacy for improved social norms, however, the outcomes of these actions are not yet clear.¹⁵⁷

In Pakistan, conservative cultural and social norms present a key challenge, being more prevalent and socially restrictive in some areas and regions than in others. This was a challenge highlighted by all key informants in terms of both human rights-based approaches that address inequalities and harmful gender and social norms and access to a full range of services for women and girls, and then also in terms of access to basic services for certain population groups, such as transgender persons.

A lack of data was also identified as a significant external barrier to UNFPA's effective implementation of LNOB. UNFPA's support for population and housing censuses significantly contributes to the LNOB agenda. UNFPA's support to census continues to adopt a human rights-based approach and aims to enhance data disaggregation. UNFPA has consistently advocated for and supported the inclusion of the Washington Group's set of questions on persons with disabilities.^{158,159} For example, in 2021, UNFPA mapped the status of disability data inclusion in censuses and large household surveys.¹⁶⁰ It also has disability data materials, including a Washington Group Questions Explainer, which have been used by organizations of persons with disabilities to understand and advocate for the inclusion of disability data in censuses and policies.¹⁶¹

Despite these efforts, the survey indicates that respondents perceive the lack of disaggregated data as a key external barrier (see Figure 12, above). There is also consensus among all respondents to this evaluation that the absence of data disaggregated at the local level, in a manner that can accurately identify those most left behind, poses a significant challenge.¹⁶²

Beyond population and housing censuses, UNFPA supports other data collection efforts, including demographic and health surveys, and other national surveys across various contexts. However, these data are not owned by UNFPA. Unlike UNICEF, which has its

156 UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

157 UNFPA (2022). Malawi Annual Report 2022. Results Achieved in Malawi.

158 The Washington Group on Disability Statistics developed a standard set of universal questions on disability to use in censuses and surveys. These questions identify and measure disability across multiple domains of functioning and enable the comparison of data.

159 UNFPA (2022). A brief explainer on The Washington Group Questions on Disability.

160 UNFPA (n.d.). Asia and Pacific. Disability data. <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/disability-data>.

161 UNFPA (2023). APRO, Annual report.

162 UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIs.

own multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS), UNFPA does not generate or manage a comparable standalone dataset.¹⁶³ Moreover, the data collected through these efforts do not consistently capture the detailed information needed to identify and analyse the intersecting factors that contribute to exclusion, as outlined in UNFPA's LNOB framework.

Promising advances are seen, particularly in the use of administrative registers. In Moldova, for example, UNFPA has supported the National Bureau of Statistics in building capacity to use administrative data for population statistics. In 2019, UNFPA supported the National Bureau of Statistics in revising the population data from the last five years using international definitions and, for the first time, including migration data based on border crossings.¹⁶⁴ This led to the development of an information system for population and migration statistics.¹⁶⁵ Still, informants noted that, while UNFPA's support for national capacity in using administrative data is promising, it also presents challenges, including issues related to privacy and confidentiality, the need for a 'do no harm' approach, as well as UNFPA technical capacities in the subject.

However, LNOB requires an understanding of population data beyond what a census can provide. As one respondent said:

*"Census counts everyone, and it is important. But we also need to note that census cannot identify LNOB groups and even then, if we end there it is not enough. We need to move further and understand why people are left behind. You don't get the why from census data collection. And I still think that we have a long way to go in regard to more in-depth studies."*¹⁶⁶

Further, the UNFPA 'furthest behind' factors are a mix of different data dimensions, with limited understanding across the organization. For example, age is a universal factor; a basic characteristic. Everyone has an age, and it is dynamic, constantly changing. Ethnicity is a basic characteristic and is static: it does not change over a lifetime. But disability status, usually taken to mean someone with a disability, is not a universal characteristic and can be static or dynamic. Location data – urban or rural, displaced, in transit etc or not, is forever changing and is less of a basic characteristic and more of a geographical locator and additional sign of aspects of vulnerability.

Therefore, different types of data across the factors must be collected in different ways and through different sources, and at different frequencies. However, there are further dimensions that add to this complexity. Firstly, as discussed in other findings, there is no clear consensus on the key factors of vulnerability, exclusion or discrimination across the United Nations system or other actors. UNFPA uses factors linked to ICPD, but these are not priority factors of other United Nations agencies or indeed governments.

163 UNICEF (n.d.) Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). <https://mics.unicef.org>.

164 UNFPA (2021). Country Programme Evaluation: Republic of Moldova 2018-2022.

165 UNFPA (2023). Evaluation of UNFPA support to population dynamics and data. Final evaluation report.

166 UNFPA global KII.

Therefore, finding consistent and comprehensive external datasets disaggregated by UNFPA factors is unlikely. UNFPA does not produce its own datasets. Secondly, many of UNFPA factors are constantly changing, data linked to these factors are not static, and updated data must be sought continuously. Thirdly, some of the factors of LNOB for UNFPA are criminalized across many contexts (sexual identity and orientation, as the key one) and holding that data could be, at best, irresponsible, and, at worst, contradicting the key tenet of do no harm.¹⁶⁷

Consequently, the lack of disaggregated data, while highlighted by all respondents as a challenge, is not something that can actually be solved. The solution may lie less in simply collecting more data and more in finding innovative ways to work with the available data – through modelling, for estimates, and for proxy indicators. Understanding these limitations and working around them is key to advancing the LNOB agenda effectively.

Finding 8: Across all contexts, UNFPA works with civil society, although the types and levels of engagement, and how meaningful the engagement is, vary.¹⁶⁸

Links to assumption 2.5

The only way to meaningfully and sustainably transform conditions for those left behind is through social norm change, which cannot be achieved through UNFPA alone, and thus partnerships are key. A 2024 multi-agency report on progress towards SDG 5 (gender equality) stated categorically that SDG.5 “cannot be achieved without the partnership of CSOs, including grassroots women’s organizations. CSOs play key roles in reaching those furthest behind, in advocating for policy change, in holding policymakers and duty bearers accountable, and as service providers.”¹⁶⁹ UNFPA has made real efforts within the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 to expand civil society partnerships, but this could go further.

Within the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, UNFPA commits to advocating for SRHR in the political agenda.¹⁷⁰ It promises to implement “leadership initiatives” to foster accountability for SRHR, gender equality, and overall women’s rights and youth rights. It promises to provide a platform for the voice of the underserved, committing to the

¹⁶⁷ United Nations (2013). The UN Sustainability Framework – do not harm and do good. Expert Group Meeting on Mainstreaming Sustainable Development in the UN system. <https://sdgs.un.org/statements/un-sustainability-framework-do-no-harm-and-do-good-11238>.

¹⁶⁸ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, and all thematic and country case studies.

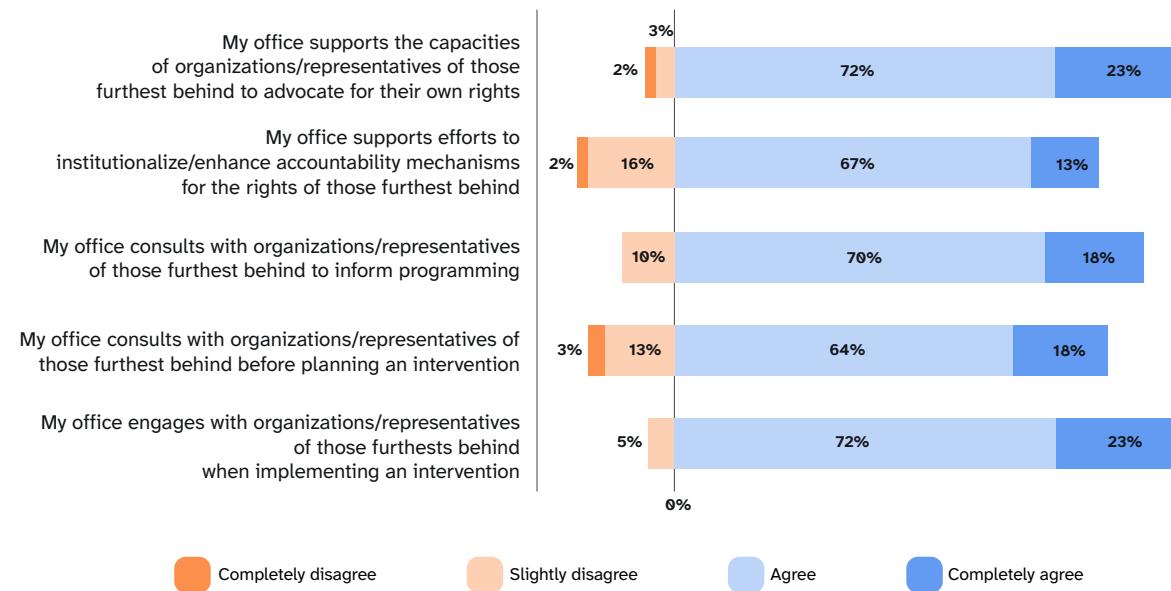
¹⁶⁹ UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, WFP (2024). Are we getting there? A synthesis of UN system evaluations of SDG 5.

¹⁷⁰ UNFPA (2021). Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 2. Change stories to accelerate the achievement of the three transformative results.

principle of ‘nothing for us without us’ that is enshrined within the LNOB Operational Plan.¹⁷¹

Respondents to the online evaluation survey highlight the intent to engage with user-led local organizations and confirm the engagement of country offices (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Engagement with user-led civil society



Source of data: Evaluation online survey results (question 7).

Other evidence from this evaluation also suggests that UNFPA has done this – to some extent. As global respondents commented, transformative change means “bringing people into our camp”.¹⁷² This involves bringing people into a collaborative space, requiring time, active engagement and a commitment to humility and attentive listening. Building genuinely equal partnerships, as opposed to using implementing partners to carry out predetermined programmes, entails identifying and empowering grassroots, user-led organizations and meaningfully shifting power to them. This is an area where the United Nations system as a whole can further strengthen its efforts.¹⁷³ There are many barriers to genuine delegation of power to civil society partners. These include rigid anti-fraud procedures, an accountability to donor countries that align United Nations support to national political interests, and the need to demonstrate measurable results that many smaller grassroots organizations do not have the capacity to provide. While UNFPA staff know what must be done to engender genuine, sustainable, transformative change, these barriers present considerable challenges to achieving this goal. As one global respondent commented: “For us, policy change that is resourced and being implemented, we need meaningful participation of our

171 UNFPA (2021). Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 2. Change stories to accelerate the achievement of the three transformative results.

172 UNFPA global KII.

173 Ibid.

stakeholders and partners that is what will get us to transformation. That means investing in ensuring our partners are being heard in spaces.”¹⁷⁴

The Strategic Plan 2022-2025 has an output (Output 3) on changing social norms, and this is reflected across regional and country programme documents too. This is a key area for transformative change, and for engaging both civil society and government, and, critically, for supporting civil society to engage with government, but it is also an area notoriously difficult to measure in terms of either contribution or attribution and is one where UNFPA progress is uneven across regions and countries.¹⁷⁵

There are examples, of course, of UNFPA contributing to social norm change interventions by working with local civil society across different countries and regions. Some of these examples include:

- In the Latin America and the Caribbean region, UNFPA has joined efforts with civil society as well as parliamentarians to support enabling national and regional environments to foster institutional accountability and to tackle discriminatory social norms. Diversifying and expanding partnerships is seen as a strategic approach to accelerate LNOB outcomes.¹⁷⁶
- In Peru, UNFPA played a critical role in facilitating the advocacy process leading to the enactment of Law No. 31945 against child marriage, through supporting the advocacy efforts of indigenous women leaders and coordinating multi-actor advocacy efforts.¹⁷⁷
- In Papua New Guinea, UNFPA started social norm change work in 2024, using the socioecological model. This work is still evolving, and UNFPA works across multiple tribal and linguistic groups.¹⁷⁸
- In Bangladesh, UNFPA works with gender diverse and ethnic minority groups that know their communities and provide realistic perspectives on the challenges these groups face.¹⁷⁹
- Across the Pacific, UNFPA has developed partnerships with civil society organizations representing indigenous groups.
- In the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, there are several partners as part of the LNOB network for youth and HIV, including Eurasian Women’s Network on AIDS (EWMA) and Teenergizer, a network of young people living with HIV.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁴ UNFPA global KII.

¹⁷⁵ UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIIs.

¹⁷⁶ KII UNFPA LACRO, CSO Costa Rica, CSO Panama, IPs Peru, CSO LAC, participants Intercultural Dialogue for Recognition and Inclusion.

¹⁷⁷ LAC case study report (Vol. III).

¹⁷⁸ Different UNFPA regional and country level KIIIs.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

While UNFPA engages with civil society in various ways, there is currently no intentional, comprehensive, or systemic global approach to partnering with civil society for sustainable social norm change that allows for clearly measurable and attributable results. UNFPA's support to civil society in this area varies significantly across contexts and countries. For example, across UMIC, UNFPA demonstrates a commitment to meaningful engagement with organizations led by the furthest-behind populations; however, its ability to foster these partnerships is significantly influenced by the varying levels of civic space across different regions and countries. For Eastern Europe and Central Asia, at the regional level, engagement with regional networks is notable, including with transgender groups and men who have sex with men, women and young people living with HIV, and persons with disabilities.¹⁸¹ Additionally, respondents report that the regional office has shifted from targeted regional events for persons with disabilities to incorporating disability inclusion into all its regional events. In the Asia and Pacific region, the regional programme evaluation found that UNFPA and its partners acknowledge the transformative role of civil society in supporting normative work.¹⁸² It is also worth noting a shift away from engaging with civil society organization implementing partners solely as service implementers, moving instead toward fostering long-term, meaningful partnerships, which allows UNFPA to support the capacity development of furthest behind-led organizations.¹⁸³

In the humanitarian context, localization is the key concept in reaching those furthest behind, particularly when connected to humanitarian access issues.

UNFPA largely partners with local and national actors in the delivery of humanitarian action, which links efficiently with the localization agenda. However, multifaceted strategic programmatic, and operational challenges were raised by respondents.¹⁸⁴ Firstly, local civil society organizations tend to be service delivery implementing partners. Secondly, it is unclear how systematically country offices have targeted dialogues with local and national partners on the concepts and framing of LNOB. While grass-roots organizations have further reach than United Nations agencies or international or even national non-governmental organizations, particularly when faced with humanitarian challenge access, and while also many grass-roots organizations are user-led, that does not mean they subscribe fully to the humanitarian principles and HRBA ethos of LNOB.

In many ways, localization is a way of reaching the furthest behind and putting the LNOB agenda into practice. However, for this to genuinely take effect it would necessitate a leap of faith away from the current rigorous results-led requirements of the United Nations system towards a more respectful and trustful position based on the

¹⁸¹ KII UNFPA, UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, T. Khomasuridze (2022). Digital survey access barriers to comprehensive FP services in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Leaving no one behind.

¹⁸² UNFPA (2024). APRO, Asia Pacific Regional Programme Evaluation.

¹⁸³ UNFPA regional level KIIs.

¹⁸⁴ All challenges listed under this finding have been highlighted by UNFPA humanitarian colleagues at global, regional and country levels.

assumption that user-led civil society organizations can and will effect change, given the opportunity to do so. Although of course, this links back to the second point, in terms of the potentially harmful discriminatory attitudes towards different factors that many local grassroots civil societies do, in practice, exhibit.

In comparison with other agencies however, UNFPA is a leader in terms of direct funding to civil society organizations. The ‘Grand Bargain’ localization commitment has a target of 25 per cent of funding going to local organizations.¹⁸⁵ In 2024, UNFPA has committed approximately 35 per cent: “Interim estimates indicate that approximately one third of UNFPA’s humanitarian response funding went to local actors in 2023, and UNFPA has ambitions to provide 43 per cent to local actors by 2025.”¹⁸⁶ An internal 2023 gender-based violence area of responsibility (AoR) review found that the UNFPA-led gender-based violence area of responsibility at the global level, and the associated sub-clusters at the country level, were leaders in localization.¹⁸⁷

UNFPA’s approach to localization is also reflected in its efforts to strengthen civil society partnerships that elevate the voices of marginalized groups and promote inclusive decision-making at the community level. This approach is further illustrated in Box 5, which highlights good practice in youth-led engagement in Malawi through UNFPA’s partnership with the Y+ Network and national youth advisory platforms.^{188,189}

Box 5: Good practice - Youth-led engagement in Malawi

In Malawi, UNFPA has demonstrated good practice in partnering with civil society to enhance the inclusion of left-behind groups in policy and programme decision-making. A key example is its support to youth-led initiatives that promote representation, accountability and leadership among marginalized populations, particularly young people living with HIV.

At the national level, UNFPA has established a Youth Advisory Panel that contributes to decision-making processes and helps ensure the organization remains responsive and accountable to the needs and priorities of young people. The panel has contributed to the institutionalization of youth engagement within UNFPA’s country programme, influencing strategic priorities and enhancing the relevance of interventions for diverse youth populations.

¹⁸⁵ IASC (2024). Localization learning space: progressing towards 25% direct funding to local and national actors. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-official-website/localisation-learning-space-progressing-towards-25-direct-funding-local-and-national-actors-0>.

¹⁸⁶ UNFPA (2024). Humanitarian Action 2024 Overview.

¹⁸⁷ UNFPA (2023). Gender-Based Violence Area-of-Responsibility (AoR) External Review.

¹⁸⁸ UNFPA (2022). Malawi Annual Report 2022 - Results Achieved in Malawi.

¹⁸⁹ UNFPA country level KIIs. KIIs with government implementing partners. FGD with representative of young people living with HIV.

UNFPA also provides technical and financial support to the Y+ Network – a collective of young people living with HIV that operates in all districts of Malawi and has global affiliations. The Y+ Network is notable for its decentralized structure, which enables young people to organize and engage through localized representation platforms at the community, district and national levels. The Y+ Network's structure has improved the visibility of young people living with HIV in policy spaces, contributing to more inclusive programming and service delivery. Further, this model enables intersectional participation, reaching young people who face multiple forms of exclusion caused by contexts such as health status, age, geography and socioeconomic background.

This example illustrates how sustained investment in youth-led, community-based structures can strengthen civic participation, improve accountability, and operationalize LNOB by ensuring that those most affected are actively involved in shaping the decisions that impact their lives.

Overall, respondents to this evaluation are clear that changing social norms will never be achieved by one agency alone; it must be achieved through multistakeholder partnerships across civil society, United Nations, governments and other donors, which must, in turn all agree on which social norms need changing and what change they want to see.¹⁹⁰ Within the partnerships necessary for transformative change, it is unlikely that the direct contribution of each specific partner will be measurable. Further, it must be a long-term commitment and effort; social norms do not change within a year or even five years, but rather within a generation. Anti-fraud, anti-corruption, anti-harassment, and other capacity requirements, hinder working with organizations that are the most grassroots, the most user-led, and the most connected to excluded communities. These organizations also tend to be the first responders in both development and humanitarian settings. They understand the challenges and the needs but cannot engage with the international development and humanitarian systems on an equal level as the systems are, by their very nature, exclusive and exclusionary towards those they are inherently intended to assist. Addressing this will require bold changes, not small shifts within the same, traditional way of working.

4.3 Evaluation question 3: Effectiveness - humanitarian

To what extent has the LNOB Operational Plan been effectively adapted for humanitarian and crisis contexts?¹⁹¹

Feminist principles applied: understanding changing power dynamics as contexts change.

¹⁹⁰ UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIs.

¹⁹¹ Assumptions: 3.1 UNFPA country offices in humanitarian and crisis/fragile contexts (including during COVID-19) have been able to continue LNOB programming, supported by the LNOB Operational Plan; 3.2 UNFPA country offices in humanitarian and crisis/fragile contexts (including during COVID-19) were/are able to understand changing dynamics of vulnerability and identify emerging and new left behind populations.

Finding 9: There is evidence of a clear intention to understand both continuing and existing vulnerabilities and newly emerging vulnerabilities within UNFPA humanitarian response programming. This, however, does not consistently translate into fully addressing the intersectional needs of those furthest behind in complex humanitarian situations.^{192,193}

Links to assumptions 3.1 and 3.2

There are a multitude of challenges unique to the humanitarian response context that do not exist in development settings. Despite this, **UNFPA has a clear view of vulnerability, and the continuing need to identify and understand vulnerability, both existing and changing.** This is not without challenges.

Many respondents to this evaluation highlighted that, while an understanding of vulnerability is built into the foundation of humanitarian response,¹⁹⁴ in many crises the needs are so overwhelming that a more nuanced assessment of vulnerability is not possible. When large-scale emergencies occur, there is a system-wide focus on life-saving responses, and this makes it very hard to prioritize LNOB as it is understood within longer-term development responses.¹⁹⁵ This is, of course, where the HDP continuum comes into play. Strengthening communities and systems and building resilience before a crisis, along with having quality and comprehensive disaggregated data sets of vulnerability, make it far easier to swiftly identify those most likely to be most vulnerable when a crisis occurs, and to respond accordingly.

Further complexities come into play when the crisis is one based in conflict, and governments and other actors may have a biased notion of who deserves aid and who does not, with divisions along ethnic, religious, geographic or linguistic grounds clouding an objective understanding of marginalization. There is also often an intentionality to restrict aid to specific groups by parties to the conflict, which has to be managed and neutralized by the international humanitarian community. In these cases, humanitarian principles – neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence¹⁹⁶ – become a necessary tool for advocacy and framing responses, but the foundational data are still necessary for the humanitarian system to be able quickly to identify and reach those most in need.

In many regards, those most in need in humanitarian situations are likely to be those with intersecting and multidimensional factors of marginalization or exclusion: those

192 Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, and all thematic and country case studies.

193 Refer to Findings 2 and 12 for additional information.

194 See the humanitarian thematic case study paper as a part of this evaluation for a more detailed discussion of this.

195 UNFPA humanitarian and development regional and country level KIIs.

196 OCHA (2011). Humanitarian Principles. <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/dms/Documents/v.2.%20website%20overview%20tab%20link%20%20Humanitarian%20Principles.pdf>.

that are perhaps LGBTQIA+ while also living with disabilities or survivors of gender-based violence, who are also rural and of an ethnic or linguistic minority.¹⁹⁷

In many humanitarian settings, UNFPA has been able to successfully identify specific vulnerabilities within general populations, including women and girls, and to do this on a regular and ongoing basis, although reaching is different from identifying. Further, there is still a necessary focus on particular populations, for example, women and girls in general, adolescents and youth (particularly girls), and SRHR-related vulnerabilities, such as HIV status, as well as disability. UNFPA humanitarian action also has a focus on hard-to-reach areas impeded by humanitarian access challenges, but there is also an increasing understanding of vulnerabilities of other population groups, or factors of vulnerability, such as migrants and asylum-seekers as well as refugees, or ethnic and religious minority groups. While this increased understanding has not demonstrably translated into reaching those groups on any consistent or systematic level, it does mean that UNFPA is putting more effort than ever before into identifying contextual vulnerabilities where possible. A good example of this is the successive Whole of Syria impact assessments, conducted across most years from 2020 to 2024.¹⁹⁸ Successive reports have highlighted the specific vulnerabilities of widows, or young married women in Syria. It is important to note that the Whole of Syria response is a particularly well-funded response for UNFPA and, while a lot of the work conducted for Whole of Syria should be viewed as best practice, not all other crises have the same level of funding to replicate all the work.

There are other examples of UNFPA's work in this area, highlighting both effective reach and the challenges associated with turning identification into reach. In Iran, UNFPA primarily focuses on refugees with legal status, while undocumented refugees are only marginally reached through UNFPA interventions in specific districts where services are provided to host communities. The evaluation of UNFPA's last cooperation cycle in Iran (2017-2021) recognized UNFPA's effectiveness in using crises as an entry point to address the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls.¹⁹⁹

In many cases, however, UNFPA continues to work with the previously identified vulnerable groups throughout crises, although in some cases, UNFPA staff confirm that in certain crises there was a need to reach out to masses, and so the notion of reaching the furthest behind had more limited value.²⁰⁰ However, the identification of these new groups (or newly recognized groups rather than newly vulnerable groups as it is more likely that crises made visible the vulnerabilities of these different populations rather than these populations only becoming vulnerable due to the crises) meant new

¹⁹⁷ UNFPA humanitarian and development regional and country level KIIIs.

¹⁹⁸ As an example: UNFPA (2023). Impact Assessment of UNFPA's Multi-Country Response to Humanitarian Crises. <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2024-09/Syria%20Country%20Office.pdf>.

¹⁹⁹ Evaluation of the 6th UNFPA Iran country programme 2017-2021.

²⁰⁰ UNFPA Pakistan KIIIs. Note, this aligns with information collected during the humanitarian thematic case study, whereby when a whole community or population, defined in geographic terms, is faced with a crisis and in desperate need of assistance, the notion of reaching the furthest behind becomes more challenging, although it must remain important.

and different risks and challenges for UNFPA. For example, working with transgender populations in crisis situations brings with it certain challenges and risks with regard to relationships with both local governments and communities. These challenges have been mitigated to a certain extent through partnerships, where UNFPA reaches populations through local and user-led civil society organizations, but this does require ongoing efforts, flexibility, innovation and creativity.²⁰¹ UNFPA's humanitarian response in Pakistan demonstrates how targeted efforts – such as mobile health units, telehealth and services for Afghan refugees – can operationalize LNOB principles in complex and high-need environments (see Box 6).²⁰²

Box 6: Reaching the furthest behind - Adaptive humanitarian action in Pakistan

UNFPA's humanitarian response in Pakistan illustrates how an understanding of pre-existing vulnerabilities can inform targeted and inclusive interventions during crises. In a context marked by repeated natural disasters, ongoing insecurity and displacement, UNFPA applied LNOB principles to ensure that marginalized populations – particularly women and girls in remote and underserved areas – had continued access to life-saving services. UNFPA's ability to mobilize rapid and tailored service delivery was recognized by local authorities and humanitarian partners as a critical gap-filler, particularly where other services had stalled due to access or insecurity.

Key interventions include the following:

- Mobile health units and boats were deployed during the 2022 and 2023 floods, which enabled UNFPA to reach cut-off communities in remote and water-logged areas and deliver life-saving sexual and reproductive health services during a time of heightened vulnerability
- Telehealth services were established in Balochistan – a province affected by multiple, overlapping emergencies, including flooding, conflict and chronic underdevelopment. This allowed continued provision of specialized sexual and reproductive health services during periods of restricted physical access, including to Afghan refugee populations
- Targeted support for Afghan refugees, particularly women, included the provision of dignity kits, psychosocial support and access to maternal and newborn health services, addressing urgent needs in the wake of the floods and ongoing displacement.

These examples demonstrate how LNOB principles can be meaningfully operationalized in humanitarian settings through adaptation, community-based delivery models and an understanding of layered vulnerabilities. It also shows how crisis response can be designed not just to restore services, but to extend access

²⁰¹ UNFPA Pakistan KII.

²⁰² Ibid.

to populations that had long been underserved. Pakistan's experience, in particular, underscores the practical application of LNOB in complex humanitarian contexts and offers valuable insights for replication in other crisis-affected settings.

A key change has been the increasing introduction and use of cash and voucher assistance (CVA). This is proving to be a uniquely valuable and respectful tool in targeting both existing and newly emerging groups of vulnerable persons in humanitarian settings. Respondents report that the increasing use of cash and voucher assistance as a delivery tool in UNFPA humanitarian response forces more consideration of targeting, and more reflection and interrogation of the standard 'one-size fits all' approach of in-kind assistance, such as dignity kits.²⁰³ In fact, there is a sense that UNFPA has not only caught up with other agencies with regard to more sophisticated vulnerability targeting methods for cash and voucher assistance, but has in fact learned from the challenges and errors of others and moved further ahead.

UNFPA has produced several reports on cash and voucher assistance and vulnerability targeting and is amassing a library of knowledge and information that is being used to refine and perfect this area of humanitarian work as it expands. For example, reports from the Whole of Syria response highlighted successes and challenges with cash assistance for transportation to and from women and girls' safe spaces or health facilities, based on various vulnerability criteria.²⁰⁴ This highlights challenges of the approach being multifaceted, including the fact that women and girls have to pay up-front the cost of going to the facility, before being reimbursed and provided with cash for the return journey. This might exclude the absolutely most vulnerable, and cause safety issues on public transport. Further, the cash amount does not include enough for anyone to accompany the women or girl (who may be an adolescent, elderly, or living with disabilities and therefore need someone to accompany them). Despite these challenges, cash assistance for transport was still considered the best modality of the options available.

UNFPA has produced quite specific reports, for example, on cash and voucher assistance for people living with HIV,²⁰⁵ which confirmed that the provision of cash and voucher assistance to people living with HIV was recommended, with unconditional cash providing the best outcomes. Another report concerned cash and voucher assistance for sexual and reproductive health in humanitarian settings²⁰⁶ and provided a multitude of examples that showed a targeted response of cash was the best option for pregnant and lactating women (for antenatal care, safe delivery, and post-natal care), those at risk of gender-based violence (generally considered to be the most vulnerable)

²⁰³ KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian staff at global and regional levels.

²⁰⁴ UNFPA Regional Humanitarian Hub for Syria and the Arab States (2022). One step closer: The essential role of transportation when accessing GBV and SRH services in humanitarian settings.

²⁰⁵ UNFPA (2023). Scaling-up CVA for people living with HIV.

²⁰⁶ UNFPA (2024). Programming brief. Cash and voucher assistance: Breaking down barriers to SRH care in humanitarian settings.

and gender-based violence survivors, as well as other key populations such as people living with HIV and female sex workers (Indonesia). An interesting example was that across multiple countries (Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon, Moldova and Myanmar) UNFPA had used cash and voucher assistance to help mitigate ‘period poverty’, which, particularly for adolescent girls, provided some level of support to allowing girls to continue to access education, therefore ensuring that adolescent girls do not slip into the out-of-school category, which in turn ensures they become more left behind: this is a transformative rather than responsive intervention.

A further report highlighted the use of cash and voucher assistance to reach newly identified left-behind populations in humanitarian crises, particularly refugee women and girls. This was the case in Egypt where, in response to the escalating Sudan crisis in 2023, UNFPA provided cash assistance to refugee survivors of gender-based violence and those at risk of gender-based violence. This was done in partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP) to ‘piggyback’ on their cash delivery modality. Another example was in Jordan, where UNFPA piloted medical vouchers for essential medicines alongside its cash for gender-based violence case management, which already sought to specifically target and include LGBTQIA+ individuals and gender-based violence survivors with disabilities.²⁰⁷

Humanitarian situations still highlight that, even with cash as a modality, the extent of suffering is often such that focusing on specific groups is not practical: for example, in the State of Palestine, UNFPA started cash assistance after the escalation of hostilities from October 2023, again partnering with the WFP delivery system, but providing cash in general to affected women and girls,²⁰⁸ which in Gaza includes all women and girls.

COVID-19 provided a wealth of lessons for UNFPA regarding vulnerability targeting in humanitarian settings. In 2023, UNFPA commissioned an evaluation on organizational resilience in light of COVID-19.²⁰⁹ The evaluation found that from the beginning of the pandemic there was a focus by UNFPA on “vulnerable and underserved groups”. Enabling factors for this included: (1) the prominence of the LNOB accelerator selected to support the three corporate COVID-19 response priorities, which identified both increased and exacerbated vulnerabilities, including secondary impact vulnerabilities (for example, an increase in domestic violence) and intersecting vulnerabilities; (2) a commitment to youth engagement; (3) recognizing the vulnerability of older persons; and (4) creative and flexible repurposing of funding to continue, adapt, revise and start relevant interventions. These factors all enabled a successful LNOB approach incorporated into the UNFPA COVID-19 response. One illustrative example of this approach is presented in Box 7, which highlights a joint project in North Macedonia that used mobile clinics to extend sexual and reproductive health services to remote

²⁰⁷ UNFPA (2024). Empowered to choose: UNFPA cash and voucher assistance (CVA).

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office (2024). Formative evaluation of the organizational resilience of UNFPA in light of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.unfpa.org/formative-evaluation-organizational-resilience-unfpa-light-its-response-covid-19-pandemic>.

populations during the pandemic, while also embedding sustainability and equity into national health systems.²¹⁰

Box 7: Good practice - Advancing LNOB through mobile health clinics in North Macedonia

As part of its COVID-19 response, UNFPA collaborated with UNICEF, the World Health Organization, the Ministry of Health and other national counterparts in North Macedonia on a joint project funded by the COVID-19 Multi-Partner Trust Fund. The project aimed to address declining access to essential services – including sexual and reproductive health, immunization and gender-based violence support – during the pandemic, particularly for women and girls in underserved and remote areas.

A key component of the project was the deployment of two mobile gynaecological clinics, which provided life-saving sexual and reproductive health services to people who were otherwise excluded from mainstream health systems. Importantly, the initiative was designed not only to meet urgent needs but also to advance the LNOB agenda beyond the emergency context.

Two key sustainability features contributed to its longer-term impact:

- **Integration with the national health data system:** The project enabled the registration of individuals previously unrecorded in the national health database. This laid the foundation for more inclusive health policy planning and stronger data systems. UNFPA is continuing to support the Ministry of Health's e-health directorate to expand analytical capacity and service delivery.
- **Cost-benefit analysis and investment case:** A cost-benefit analysis was embedded in the project to assess the value of mobile health service delivery. This evidence-based approach demonstrated the effectiveness of the model and informed national policymaking. Within 18 months, the Ministry of Health reportedly tripled its investment in mobile clinics as a direct result.

This example highlights how emergency responses can be designed with sustainability and equity in mind, directly contributing to longer-term systems strengthening and improved inclusion of previously underserved populations.

In Türkiye, there is evidence of how the health mediator model was also one of the most effective approaches to reach communities left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic, mostly notably women and girls from rural refugee communities. At this point, UNFPA's rural refugee programme had established both static and mobile clinics, with appropriately trained health personnel. As such, UNFPA's rural refugee programme

²¹⁰ National counterparts: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, E-health Directorate, Association of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians, Committee on Safe Motherhood and Healthy Newborn, Macedonian Medical Association, Macedonian Association of Nurses and Midwives, University Clinic of Psychiatry, Macedonian Red Cross and civil society organizations.

was at the frontline with triage, sample-taking, and healthcare from the first week of the COVID-19 emergency response. One key informant reported that, while many other projects had stalled due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and lockdowns, the rural refugee programme actively supported ministry and provincial health activities, and in doing so was able to continue to identify people in need of sexual and reproductive health services, such as pregnant women and new mothers. For example, there are reports that some women were reluctant to go to facilities for vaccination or childbirth, making health mediators and mobile teams that they trusted even more important.²¹¹ Additionally, one of UNFPA's implementing partners – the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants – played a critical role in providing COVID-19 information to migrants and refugees, by producing it in six different languages and disseminating it through the Migrant TV YouTube channel. This served as a major tool to disseminate information about lockdowns and so forth to refugees, reducing risk protection issues that may have arisen from not knowing about or understanding new or rapidly changing rules and regulations.²¹²

The COVID-19 pandemic was also a push for better cash and voucher assistance targeting. Across the world, there was an increased in domestic violence and intimate partner violence due to lockdowns.²¹³ This raises a key issue of what programming needs to continue despite emergencies as, while there is an understandable tendency in humanitarian situations (including COVID-19) to pare back 'development-focused' work, and concentrate solely on life-saving responses, the reason domestic violence increased during COVID-19 was due to the overarching drive of toxic masculinity as a result of men's fear of uncertainty, increased poverty, a lack of earning potential and disruption.

At this point, as is reflected across all kinds of crises, not just COVID-19, engagement programming for men and boys, and social and gender norms programming are halted, defunded and suspended, exactly when they are needed most, in favour of the life-saving response. Again, while this is understandable, and there is no clear answer, the damage this inflicts cannot be ignored. It also means that some groups, and particularly LGBTQIA+ and other groups of men and boys, outside of the main UNFPA focus on women and girls, become even more excluded. This is an issue reflected across the system, not just within UNFPA. A 2022 report highlighted that Humanitarian Policy Group research in northern Nigeria spoke with 79 LGBTQIA+ individuals, almost none of whom had ever participated in humanitarian assessments.²¹⁴ This report also highlighted that inclusion is "often buried inside a protection mainstreaming policy or only focuses on a single issue such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)

211 Key informant interviews with UNFPA staff and UN agencies.

212 Key informant interviews with UNFPA implementing partners.

213 UNFPA (2020). Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-Based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage. Interim Technical Note.

214 V. Barbelet, O. Lough, & S. Njer (2022). Towards more inclusive, effective, and impartial humanitarian action.

guidelines on inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action”²¹⁵ and that in reality, inclusion tends to be deprioritized in large-scale emergency responses in favour of acting at scale and reaching as many as possible of those most in need.

Finding 10: The LNOB Operational Plan does not fully capture or reflect some key dimensions of LNOB in UNFPA humanitarian response, including the necessity for life-saving prioritizations and clear formalized responsibilities.²¹⁶

Links to assumptions 3.1 and 3.2

There are specific and unique external challenges for LNOB in humanitarian action that are not necessarily equivalent to challenges in development settings, and these could be better addressed in the LNOB Operational Plan.

UNFPA humanitarian interventions face challenges that are different from development programming challenges with regard to LNOB and must be addressed within the parameters of global humanitarian architecture: the LNOB Operational Plan could benefit from further refinement to better support these specific needs.

Firstly, a key challenge that is not reflected in the LNOB Operational Plan is that of humanitarian access. UNFPA has historically been more cautious compared to other United Nations agencies that have a longer and more embedded humanitarian profile: the 2019 UNFPA humanitarian capacity evaluation found clear evidence that UNFPA was targeting geographically “limited only by challenges of resources and/or security and access” but with limited reference to how UNFPA was addressing humanitarian access issues.²¹⁷ Since then, the Humanitarian Response Division has begun to develop a humanitarian access guidance, including increasing the agency’s expertise on civilian-military coordination, which is crucial for humanitarian access.²¹⁸ However, the nuances and challenges around this critical issue for humanitarian situations are not reflected within the LNOB Operational Plan. Ultimately, LNOB is about protection for those who currently do not have it: access is also about protection. The two are inextricably linked and access challenges must be addressed at a corporate level, with funding commitment, if UNFPA is to effectively and consistently reach those furthest behind in humanitarian settings.

Secondly, the humanitarian system is well established with clear responsibilities for different United Nations agencies. For UNFPA, humanitarian action comes with specific system-wide formalized responsibilities, and this necessarily focuses

²¹⁵ V. Barbelet, O. Lough, & S. Njer (2022). Towards more inclusive, effective, and impartial humanitarian action.

²¹⁶ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, the LAC regional case study, and the two thematic case studies.

²¹⁷ UNFPA (2019). Evaluation of the UNFPA capacity in Humanitarian Action (2012-2019). <https://www.unfpa.org/evaluation-unfpa-capacity-humanitarian-action-2012-2019>.

²¹⁸ KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian staff at global, regional and country levels.

attention on women and girls as a group rather than a more factor-based and a more comprehensive understanding of vulnerabilities.

UNFPA has specific responsibilities in the form of the formalized gender-based violence area of responsibility provider of last resort at the global level and the associated gender-based violence sub-clusters at the country level. It also has a less structured, but nonetheless important, role of sexual and reproductive health lead for reproductive health working groups at the country level under the World Health Organization (WHO)-led health cluster.²¹⁹ This means there is less focus within UNFPA's core mandate areas in humanitarian response, allocated based on a reasonably strict coordination area, for other issues such LGBTQIA+ persons, or persons with disabilities.

This does not mean that an understanding of other factor dimensions does not happen at all. However, it is less consistent and more constrained by formalized humanitarian architecture than the clear focus on women and girls as part of a core and consistent UNFPA humanitarian responsibility and role. Further, there are notable examples of good practice in engaging LGBTQIA+ populations in UNFPA programming humanitarian contexts.²²⁰ In fact, even where it has been difficult for UNFPA to engage with LGBTQIA+ populations in development programming, due to a number of barriers including internal attitudinal barriers (see EQ5 for more information), in humanitarian settings sometimes accessing these populations can be easier under the explicit and non-negotiable humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Indeed, these principles provide an excellent driving factor for UNFPA colleagues with regard to LNOB and rights-based approaches that perhaps has not, to date, been fully leveraged.

At regional and country levels, there remains some confusion as to how to use the LNOB Operational Plan for supporting a humanitarian response. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean, UNFPA informants highlighted that the lack of integration between development and humanitarian programming is also noticeable when it refers to the LNOB Operational Plan, which hinders not only UNFPA's capacity to reach the furthest behind in humanitarian and emergency contexts, but also its communication of humanitarian results under the LNOB perspective and vice-versa.²²¹ Due to this lack of integration, it is unclear to what extent the LNOB Operational Plan has supported LNOB programming in humanitarian settings, particularly in the identification of emerging and newly left-behind populations.

Overall, while there are challenges, there is also a lot of scope to see successes. The intent to reach the most vulnerable, and the most affected by crises, is inherent both within the humanitarian response at the system-wide level in general and within UNFPA in particular. The objective of identifying and reaching those most in need (to employ more humanitarian-orientated language) is inbuilt within the foundation

²¹⁹ WHO (n.d.) Health Cluster. <https://healthcluster.who.int>.

²²⁰ UNFPA humanitarian global, regional and country level KIIs; country case studies.

²²¹ KII UNFPA LACRO.

of humanitarian action²²² and could be integrated further into the overall LNOB Operational Plan to transform the LNOB Operational Plan into one that works across the HDP continuum.

Lack of data remains a significant challenge for LNOB in humanitarian settings, and UNFPA has a clear role to play here. The primary issue that remains is that the level of rigour seen in some contexts (such as the Whole of Syria response work or the Afghanistan work) is not consistent across all responses and is not based on any kind of existing, universal, quality, reliable, up-to-date datasets.

UNFPA has a well-evidenced role in providing population statistics for humanitarian action, under the framework of the common operational datasets – population statistics (COD-PS).²²³ These challenges have been well recognized across different agency evaluations across the years. For example, a 2018 UNICEF evaluation²²⁴ discussed these issues, and found that an overall seemingly unsolvable problem was around “identifying numbers of people in need”. Critically, the number of people in need identified in the humanitarian needs overviews is based on accessible populations and existing accessible population data (which themselves might be outdated and unreliable) but these data might not include all population groups and it is likely that those groups not counted are those that are furthest behind before the crisis even begins. There are two very specific challenges here: (a) ‘people in need’ is a more top-to-bottom number, in other words, there is an overall ‘people in need’ and then each sector or cluster develops its own target figure. However, it is not always clear how this figure is then translated into cluster targets, which might be specifically for children (that is, a child protection sub-cluster), or specifically for women and girls (that is, a gender-based violence sub-cluster). Importantly, the cluster target set is not usually the totality of those in need, but rather a figure determined by a mixed criteria of those in need and those the expected resources and strength of response are likely to be able to reach; and (b) in recent years there has been more of a bottom-to-top approach, where the starting point is each cluster identifying its own ‘people in need’ number. However, this of course, leads to double counting, where the same person is considered to be in need by the food security cluster, the protection cluster, the education cluster, and the water, sanitation and hygiene cluster.

As a result of this, some humanitarian and strategic response plans simply stopped trying to calculate a consolidated ‘people in need’ figure, or target figure, but instead just presented the numbers and targets for each sector – which of course, created inconsistencies across crises, and an inability to compare the overall scale of different crises.²²⁵ This system-wide issue has not satisfactorily been resolved and, while UNFPA is increasingly contributing data expertise to the system, it is not sufficient and a data

222 UNFPA humanitarian global, regional and country level KIIs.

223 For further information on this see UNFPA: Evaluation of UNFPA's support to population dynamics and data. 2022. <https://www.unfpa.org/evaluation-unfpa-support-population-dynamics-and-data>.

224 UNICEF (2018). Evaluation of UNICEF's coverage and quality in complex humanitarian situations.

225 UNICEF (2018). Evaluation of UNICEF's coverage and quality in complex humanitarian situations.

gap still remains, perhaps, as highlighted above, as an unresolvable challenge.²²⁶ The LNOB Operational Plan makes no reference to how UNFPA has a unique role to play within this area of humanitarian population data for identifying and reaching those furthest behind.

A key opportunity that the LNOB Operational Plan should reflect on is increased working across the HDP continuum. There is a growing recognition among informants of the importance of strengthening national emergency preparedness and response efforts, beyond the minimum initial service package, with the understanding that national preparedness plans can serve as key entry points for LNOB. This gains particular importance when considering the increasing frequency of climate change events, which push countries to oscillate between humanitarian and development contexts and back again. In such contexts, effectively linking the humanitarian response with preparedness and resilience is essential for enabling countries to better address future crises. However, as noted by the recent UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 evaluation, limited guidance and operational support have hindered UNFPA's capacity to programme across the HDP continuum, and this includes there being no clear guidance within the LNOB Operational Plan for this opportunity.

4.4 Evaluation question 4: Coherence

To what extent does the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan align with, add value to, fill a gap in, and contribute to broader development and humanitarian efforts?²²⁷

Feminist principles applied: UNFPA contribution to transformative change.

Finding 11: Although the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan is clearly aligned with the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and other frameworks, there are multiple UNFPA guidance, strategies and plans for specific groups and factors, which creates some confusion at the country level.²²⁸

Links to assumption 4.1

The LNOB Operational Plan is explicitly aligned with the current UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 with regard to the focus placed on LNOB within the UNFPA Strategic

226 UNFPA humanitarian global, regional and country level KII.

227 Assumptions: 4.1 The UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan is coherent with, and has continued over time to be aligned to, global UNFPA frameworks including the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025; 4.2 The UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan adds value to a broader attempt to reach left-behind groups within the UN system, adding value specifically through the provision of disaggregated and localized data to government and the UN system; 4.3 UNFPA's normative policy and advocacy interventions with governments, particularly through human rights-based approach and promoting HR instruments, increases interventions aimed at reaching those furthest behind.

228 Evidence comes from the global and regional KII and document review, the LAC regional case study, and the Pakistan case study.

Plan 2022-2025 as well as, more implicitly, with the spirit of partnerships outlined in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (including as an accelerator).^{229,230} The overall global programme design within the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 confirms that all programmes are “expected to apply the prioritization of leaving no one behind as one of four key principles”,²³¹ with the other principles being gender-responsive programming, human rights-based approaches and building resilience.²³² The global programme also expects to “significantly expand research including new ‘leaving no one behind’ and policy research”.²³³ The global programme articulates a commitment to producing and providing guidance and tools on LNOB and using its data expertise for identifying those left furthest behind.

Further, there is an understanding across global, regional and country levels that a focus on LNOB assists with UNFPA’s mandate under the ICPD agenda, and this links inextricably to the three transformative results that frame all of UNFPA’s efforts.

Understanding who is being left behind in regard to the ICPD agenda, and therefore in regard to the three transformative results and associated Sustainable Development Goals (3 and 5), is what aligns the LNOB Operational Plan with the overall strategic direction of UNFPA.

At the regional level, all UNFPA regional programmes have included, to a greater or lesser degree, reference to LNOB as a cross-cutting and integrated component.²³⁴ A notable example is in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the UNFPA regional office LNOB strategy is fully aligned with global, regional and national frameworks, and it has leveraged its normative policy role to further advance guaranteeing and realizing the rights of those furthest behind. It has been not only integrated into the six interconnected outputs, but also increasingly operationalized as an accelerator. Furthermore, Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO) is currently focusing on mainstreaming LNOB into programming, in line with the Strategic Plan’s strategic shift on aligning organizational efforts to achieve the three transformative results and therefore the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 5.

At the country level, respondents report that all programming elements are based, in some manner or another, on the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, the three transformative results, and the ethos of LNOB, if not specific LNOB guidance. As well as alignment to UNFPA strategic frameworks, UNFPA country offices are also expected to align to United Nations country-level frameworks, both contributing to and aligning country programme documents on the common country analysis, and the UNSDCF

229 The evaluation notes that this finding highlights the clear linkages between the LNOB Operational Plan and other different frameworks, which is different from the finding under EQ1 that confirmed there are some challenges within explicit linkages with different concepts and terminology, such as vulnerability or marginalization.

230 See Finding 6 on LNOB as an accelerator and how it links with other accelerators.

231 UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 4. Global Programme.

232 Ibid.

233 Ibid.

234 UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 4. Regional Programmes.

or equivalent, almost all of which across the globe will now reference LNOB and reaching the furthest behind.²³⁵ In Pakistan, for example, UNFPA strikes a balance of alignment both with the national country framework, which reflects some explicit and implicit references to LNOB, and with UNFPA's strategic documents. The language of LNOB is well-embedded in the country programme document for 2023-2027 with the articulation that the principles of both LNOB and RFB will be "central to the programme" and highlighting certain groups, including women, girls, and young people, those in hard-to-reach areas, refugees, persons with disabilities, and transgender persons.²³⁶ The UNFPA programme also aligns with the primary national framework for United Nations cooperation with the Government of Pakistan, namely the UNSDCF. The UNSDCF reflects on the existing and ongoing commitments of the Government of Pakistan to LNOB and RFB principles, particularly the universal health coverage scheme and the social protection Benazir Income Support Programme.^{237,238}

Overall, there remains a focus on groups, rather than factors both within UNFPA (across all levels) and externally. To a certain extent, this drives a small contradiction between the LNOB strategic framing and other policies and guidance. For example, the global programme, while providing an absolute commitment to identifying those left furthest behind and targeting programmes to these identified persons, also has overall commitments to specific already-identified groups. A case in point is the commitment to aligning programmatic work at the country level with the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy.²³⁹ The '2023 We Decide Disability Report' reinforces this focus, stating that all regional plans in the 2022-2025 strategy have identified the specific rights and needs of persons with disabilities as a necessary focus area.²⁴⁰ Additionally, the 'People of African Descent 2020' report highlighted a specific UNFPA initiative that centres on people of African descent, illustrating the agency's ongoing emphasis on prioritizing groups.²⁴¹

UNFPA has already begun to consider the future, both in terms of the next strategic plan (the third in a consecutive series of three) and, further away, the post-2030 Agenda. Even at the regional level, UNFPA is participating and conducting future studies, for example, in the East and Southern Africa region, where there is an ongoing exercise for 'futures thinking', including megatrends and how these will impact on UNFPA's role and how best to position UNFPA within a changing geopolitical landscape.²⁴² There is an understanding that on current trend, more than 50 countries are expected to graduate to middle-income country status by 2030. This shift will make

235 UNFPA country level KIIIs.

236 UNFPA (2022). Country Programme Document for Pakistan 2023-2027.

237 Ibid.

238 Benazir Income Support Programme: <https://bisp.gov.pk>.

239 UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Annex 4. Global Programme.

240 UNFPA (2023). The UNFPA We Decide Programme: A Catalyst for Disability Inclusion.

241 UNFPA (2020). Scaling up UNFPA's response to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality for people of African descent.

242 UNFPA regional KIIIs.

addressing issues of inequality and LNOB even more critical in achieving whatever targets replace the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite this, conversations on LNOB more broadly in the United Nations system appear to be dying down so it is unclear how much prominence LNOB will be given in a post-2030 world.²⁴³

Finding 12: Each United Nations agency views, understands, and addresses LNOB through its own mandate lens, which then has to somehow align for joint analysis and programming. UNFPA contributes a distinct added value to these efforts, which varies between country contexts.^{244,245}

Links to the overall question of coherence²⁴⁶

There is a conceptual challenge with regard to a common understanding of LNOB, when every United Nations agency sees those furthest behind through the lens of their own mandate. This mandate lens prevents any common agreement on who is objectively, and across all dimensions of the human experience, left behind, despite attempts being made through common country analysis frameworks. Every United Nations agency views the LNOB agenda through the very specific lens of its own mandate: children, for UNICEF, for example, or refugees and asylum-seekers for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

However, at the same time, the United Nations has an overarching LNOB framework and, while at the global level there is the luxury of this being somewhat theoretical, at the country level, the need for common country analyses and UNSDCFs that can specifically confirm and state United Nations system-wide-agreed groups or factors of vulnerability, makes the ‘mandate-lens’ challenge one that is quite significant. This becomes even more problematic in humanitarian situations, where common humanitarian needs overviews and humanitarian response plans are required and cooperation and coordination is generally more critical than in longer-term development projects, which will often support different line ministries, and work in quite siloed manners.²⁴⁷ But across development and humanitarian settings, all United Nations agencies use their own tools and their own mandate lens to determine who is left furthest behind, which makes a coordinated and coherent approach to LNOB across the United Nations system difficult.²⁴⁸

²⁴³ UNFPA global KIIs.

²⁴⁴ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, the two thematic case studies and the LAC regional case study.

²⁴⁵ Refer to Findings 2 and 9 for additional information.

²⁴⁶ There was not a specific assumption on coherence of the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan with wider UN LNOB strategic frameworks. However, this issue is relevant to the overall question of coherence, and so a finding related to this has been presented here.

²⁴⁷ UNFPA and external global and regional KIIs.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

In UMIC and low fertility countries, such as in the Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and Pacific, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions, there are specific considerations for a unified approach, and UNFPA contributes and adds value here. The UMIC and low fertility thematic case study found that there was a consensus across respondents that a more integrated United Nations approach is necessary to effectively address root causes of exclusion and inequalities in UMIC contexts, and a clear sense that this is something that UNFPA should not address alone. LNOB becomes particularly important considering the specific demographic challenges that all three regions face and that are intrinsically connected with the megatrends identified by current UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (for example, ageing, migration, climate change, digitalization).²⁴⁹ Additionally, respondents report that the fact that the LNOB agenda can be particularly sensitive and political, means that a strong political will is needed from the United Nations Resident Coordinator to raise the LNOB profile within the UNCT agendas.

UNFPA is often a strong LNOB voice in these contexts. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, the United Nations entities consulted within this evaluation commended UNFPA's capacity to contribute with data, which has been key to bolstering LNOB positioning in common country assessments and, consequently, in UNSDCFs, as well as its capacity to combine upstream and downstream work, which translate into valuable knowledge, practical know-how and political capital to the UNCTs.²⁵⁰ UNFPA in Latin America and the Caribbean has increasingly become the go-to agency for issues related to people of African descent, indigenous communities, and adolescents and youth.²⁵¹

Figure 14 highlights how country office staff view UNFPA's contribution to the system, across all settings.

In humanitarian settings, LNOB is not the overriding language of the humanitarian system. Instead, the humanitarian ecosystem (under the architecture of IASC, and the coordination management role of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the coordination role of UNHCR in refugee contexts) speaks more widely of the centrality of protection²⁵² and people-centred approaches included within approaches to accountability to affected populations.²⁵³ The system does not, explicitly, focus on LNOB although the principles embedded within LNOB are found across the centrality of protection and accountability to affected population approaches.

²⁴⁹ EECA Regional Programme Evaluation, AP Regional Programme Evaluation, UNFPA informants.

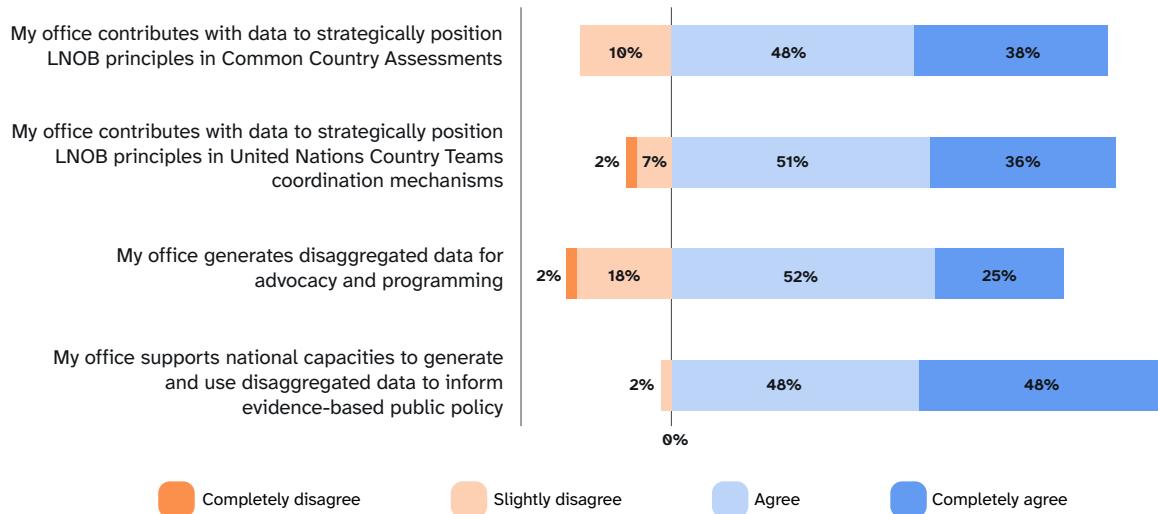
²⁵⁰ Other UN entities Panama and Costa Rica.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Global Protection Cluster (n.d.) Centrality of Protection. <https://globalprotectioncluster.org/themes/centralityprotection>.

²⁵³ IASC (n.d.) Strengthening Accountability to Affected People. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/strengthening-accountability-affected-people>.

Figure 14: UNFPA data contribution to the broader system



Source: Evaluation online survey results (question 8).

However, even within these approaches, and notwithstanding the different framing and language, there remains no consistent agreement within the humanitarian system as to who is most left behind, and how best to reach them.

For UNFPA, and as referenced above in Finding 9, there is often a challenge to prioritize vulnerability beyond gender and age, given formalized responsibilities for the gender-based violence area of responsibility and sub-cluster and the reproductive health working groups. All other agencies have their own focus populations (for UNICEF, children, for UNHCR, refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless persons etc). The humanitarian system is considered by respondents to be one where every agency is “jostling to ensure primacy for their mandate and ensure that is being elevated”.²⁵⁴ As many respondents noted, there is no genuinely depoliticized and objective notion of what being left behind means. Factors are linked to mandate areas for United Nations agencies, and this means all prioritization of the most vulnerable is subjective. Respondents highlight that this is reflected in what OCHA is now terming “boundary setting and intersectoral prioritization within humanitarian planning”²⁵⁵ rather than leaving it to humanitarian country teams and different clusters to argue as to the most pressing need, there is a more systematic way of doing this.

However, in most humanitarian cases, the fight from each agency to elevate its own mandate continues. This is not necessarily a criticism of the staff working within the system: it is a natural consequence of the system. Indeed, the cluster system itself (each cluster with a sectoral United Nations lead agency), designed to enhance coordination, instead promotes competition across sectors. A recent ‘Review of the

²⁵⁴ UNFPA global KII.

²⁵⁵ OCHA Geneva, Programme support branch (2015). Prioritization within the Humanitarian Programme Cycle.

IASC Protection Policy' highlighted the primary challenge of the structure of the system being that people themselves are not split into different types of protection or assistance needs: the system is not designed around the needs of those most affected.²⁵⁶ Regardless of attempts to ensure people-centred approaches, the system itself is not people-centred.

Finding 13: UNFPA has made significant contributions to the visibility of different groups by supporting population data that are necessary across all settings in order to know not only who is being included but also who is being excluded. However, the high cost of up-to-date, credible, disaggregated data is an ongoing challenge. A realistic assessment of the availability, feasibility and optimal use of population data in different contexts is needed, but it is not currently being discussed.²⁵⁷

Links to assumption 4.2

There is a clear will across all respondents for UNFPA to further leverage its data capacity for increased equality. Many respondents to this evaluation spoke of both the need for more LNOB-disaggregated data in general and the need for UNFPA to contribute more to this area.²⁵⁸ With regard to the former: there are limited genuine LNOB data that exist at the country level, in a comprehensive, consistent, quality, updated and accessible format. There are limited LNOB variables in either census data or civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) data: both areas with significant UNFPA contributions.²⁵⁹ While each United Nations agency will gather LNOB data – often in different ways and using different models across different countries – for its own, mandate-lens-specific target groups – there is no consistency of agreeing factors and data collection across these.

This desire for UNFPA to provide more leadership and added value to the system on LNOB data is expressed despite the recognition that UNFPA does not have its own data set or, currently, data that specifically highlight inequalities overall. UNICEF has multiple indicator cluster surveys (a longstanding series of surveys conducted every few years since 1995), which provide significant vulnerability data from a child protection-lens.²⁶⁰ Country governments conduct, in addition to census, demographic and health surveys, supported by USAID since 1984, which provide additional categories of data.²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) (2022). Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy.

²⁵⁷ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, and the two thematic case studies.

²⁵⁸ UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIs.

²⁵⁹ See the 2023 UNFPA evaluation of UNFPA's contribution to population data and dynamics.

²⁶⁰ UNICEF (n.d.) Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). <https://mics.unicef.org>.

²⁶¹ The Demographic and Health Surveys Program (n.d.). Who We Are. <https://dhsprogram.com/Who-We-Are/About-Us.cfm>.

For UNFPA, there has been sporadic support in the past to gender and generational surveys, but UNFPA is no longer referenced as a supporting partner on the gender and generational survey webpage.²⁶² Producing a specific dataset would be a huge ongoing investment and one that would be necessary over multiple decades, such as the demographic and health survey and multiple indicator cluster surveys, and so it is not clear that UNFPA should have its own data sets, but it is also clear that currently existing data are not sufficient to understand LNOB factors in a consistent manner.

External partners agree that quality LNOB data are not available.²⁶³ Further, data are, of course, political. Issues of LGBTQIA+ status, ethnicity and religious affiliations are all drivers of conflict and exclusion and in many cases holding these data can be harmful. Governments often have a bias and do not want objective data to be accessible with regard to any discrimination against any political groups.²⁶⁴ In addition to this, lack of common objectives for deciding who is and is not left behind, as highlighted in the previous finding, means, in reality, that pure and objective data across all dimensions and factors are perhaps impossible. Data are political. Respondents have highlighted that even tool such as the Washington Group Short Set questions²⁶⁵ are still flawed (for example, the tool may not fully capture the severity of the disability experienced by some people).²⁶⁶ Data on controversial groups such as LGBTQIA+ have the potential to be actively harmful.

At the time this evaluation was conducted, UNFPA was developing its new strategic plan, and an output focused on data was being considered as part of ongoing global-level discussions.²⁶⁷ This has been discussed across regions for some time²⁶⁸ suggesting a growing recognition of its importance. Discussions indicate that the emerging output on data may be accompanied by a corporate data strategy, which ideally would include a strong LNOB lens. Such a strategy would be important for supporting a move from a response-level to a systems-level approach in addressing LNOB and RFB.

A notable example of progress in this area is provided in Box 8, which highlights UNFPA's work in Latin America and the Caribbean to improve the statistical visibility of people of African descent and indigenous populations through the 2020 round of national censuses.^{269,270}

262 Generations & Gender Programme (n.d.). About. <https://www.ggp-i.org>.

263 External global KIIs.

264 Ibid.

265 Washington Group on Disability Statistics (n.d.). Question Sets. <https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/>.

266 External global KIIs.

267 UNFPA global KIIs.

268 For example, refer to EECARO (2024) Regional Programme Evaluation.

269 KII UNFPA LACRO, KII Other UN entity; ECLAC, Guaranteeing indigenous people's rights in Latin America progress in the past decade and remaining challenges, 2014.

270 UNFPA (2023). LACRO, 2022 Annual Report - Latin America Caribbean Regional Office. UNFPA (2024). LACRO, 2023 Annual Report - Latin America Caribbean Regional Office.

Box 8: Good practice - Strengthening LNOB data in Latin America and the Caribbean

In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), UNFPA has made significant contributions to improving the statistical visibility of marginalized populations – particularly people of African descendant and indigenous people – through its support for the 2020 round of population censuses.

UNFPA provided technical and strategic assistance to countries to include or refine racial-ethnic self-identification variables, leading to measurable results: the number of countries incorporating this variable in their census increased from 13 in the 2010 round to 23 countries in the 2020 round. This marks a significant regional shift toward enhancing the visibility of historically excluded groups.

In alignment with broader self-identification efforts, UNFPA supported a range of innovative awareness-raising campaigns, working in close partnership with national and regional movements led by people of African descent. Additionally, LACRO has helped countries integrate the Washington Group Questions on Disability into census and survey instruments and facilitated knowledge exchanges to support the inclusion of disability indicators in administrative registers.

This example demonstrates how UNFPA's data work at the regional level can advance LNOB by: supporting more inclusive national data systems; increasing visibility of furthest behind groups for policy action; and building long-term statistical capacity in partnership with marginalized communities.

In humanitarian settings, such as in West and Central Africa and Arab States regions, humanitarian population data are a key area for UNFPA but this area has not been sufficiently invested in or leveraged and remains an area of opportunity, although other agencies are filling a gap. UNFPA contributes significantly to population data in humanitarian settings through the COD-PS. This is managed by the UNFPA Technical Division rather than the Humanitarian Response Division. Common operational datasets (of which population statistics is just one dataset) have been in use since 2008 to try to provide clear baseline information to all humanitarian agencies and organizations responding to a humanitarian crisis. Overall, these are managed by OCHA, although different agencies input to different datasets.

In general, respondents to this humanitarian thematic case study conveyed that the data, and UNFPA's role in data, are important. However, there is also a sense that current humanitarian datasets (particularly COD-PS) do not sufficiently illuminate existing or newly emerging vulnerability.²⁷¹ It is incredibly difficult to get updated data on hard-to-reach areas where humanitarian access is a challenge. Displaced populations can move rapidly. The data are disaggregated, certainly, but do not – cannot – provide a full range of vulnerability factors. It is something that should be improved system-wide, and most key informants believe UNFPA has a role in doing

²⁷¹ KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian staff at global, regional and country levels.

so. However, right now, the data, while better than nothing, are not as useful as many believe.²⁷²

Localization also plays a part here, as a lot of data flows from the implementing partner in the hard-to-reach area up to UNFPA. It is paramount that UNFPA provides capacity building to small, local organizations for collection of data, but this also has to account for any bias or discriminatory attitudes within civil society partners, which can often be an inherent aspect of any civil conflict (for example, in Sudan).

Other agencies, such as UNHCR, WFP, or the International Organization for Migration (IOM) may have better population data and while UNFPA's contribution, particularly through COD-PS, is important, UNFPA does not work in a silo and using other population datasets is critical. The International Organization for Migration has a displacement tracking matrix,²⁷³ which is widely used across the system. In large-scale emergencies, WFP does conduct detailed household registration for food needs. Both mechanisms have required years of high and consistent investment from the respective agencies, which has not been matched by UNFPA. Ad hoc efforts have been made in different places; for example, in northwest Nigeria, UNFPA did one year of forecasting population projections in hard-to-reach areas, but did not have the funds to continue, and so OCHA had to take over.²⁷⁴ Situations like this are somewhat hindering to the reputation of UNFPA as the data agency.

Data in UMIC and low fertility settings, such as in Asia and Pacific and Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions, is equally critical but for different reasons.

Respondents to the UMIC thematic case study at the country level reported a strong UNFPA contribution of analysis on LNOB to inform common country analyses, and UNFPA was recognized by United Nations Resident Coordinators for this contribution. Moreover, UNFPA country offices are advocating for, and fostering understand of, the concept of LNOB within the United Nations. UNFPA is recognized for its contribution with data and good relations with national statics offices in UMIC, but there are several challenges related to LNOB data availability. Despite the UNFPA contribution to national data collection efforts, the census being one of the most important exercises due to its universality, informants have raised the fact that this does not necessarily translate into UNFPA actually being able to access the data produced, as countries tend to be protective of data.²⁷⁵ The political aspect of data has also been raised, with ethnicity being a major contentious factor. Informants highlighted several challenges related to census data, ranging from non-disclosure of results (or disclosing only partial results that do not necessarily support LNOB efforts), to census results not being widely accepted.

272 KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian staff at global, regional and country levels.

273 IOM (n.d.) Displacement Tracking Matrix. <https://dtm.iom.int/>.

274 KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian staff at global, regional and country levels.

275 AP Regional Programme Evaluation (survey to country offices).

Positive LNOB joint programming experiences raised during data collection also provide insights on some enablers that allowed UNFPA to contribute a broader attempt to reach left-behind groups within the United Nations system. For instance, in Albania, the LNOB joint programme is strictly aligned with UNSDCF outcomes, and one of the factors that has enabled this is the fact that there is a long history of United Nations joint programming, as the country became, in 2007, one of eight countries worldwide to pilot the United Nations Delivering as One reform.²⁷⁶ In China, the joint programme between UNFPA, the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNDP, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF, 'Promote the Entitlements and Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, China', is under the aegis of the UNCT in China, which is recognized as having fostered the trickling-down of the agenda to the country level. Also, in China, there are United Nations thematic groups on LNOB and disability, which shows existing awareness and priority within the UNCT.²⁷⁷

Ultimately, and across all settings, there is a need for a realistic assessment of what data are available and feasible to be collected in different settings, how they can be effectively used, and how their use can consistently promote human rights and reduce inequalities. This might be the only feasible forward route. Despite this, many UNFPA respondents believe that data are UNFPA's niche, and UNFPA could and should be doing more. There is no clear agreement on whether that means pushing for further disaggregation of existing data sets or developing a new LNOB data set. Either way, the future of UNFPA's contribution to LNOB data should be considered a serious element of UNFPA's overall contribution to LNOB.²⁷⁸

Finding 14: Normative work is necessary for transformative change, particularly in the context of the LNOB agenda, and there are clear examples across different contexts of how UNFPA is doing this. A key added value of UNFPA is linking upstream and downstream support, acting in a convenor role to defend civil society space and bringing civil society's voice to normative advocacy.²⁷⁹

Links to assumption 4.3

Transformative change only comes from both downstream programming, supporting civil society and addressing social norms at the community level, and upstream work with governments, at the normative, structural level of policies.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ United Nations Albania (n.d.) The United Nations in Albania. <https://albania.un.org/en/about/about-the-un>.

²⁷⁷ KIIs with UNFPA staff for UMIC and low fertility case study.

²⁷⁸ UNFPA global regional and country level KIIs.

²⁷⁹ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, and the three country case studies, Malawi, Pakistan and Türkiye.

²⁸⁰ UNFPA's work on supporting civil society is presented under Finding 8 under evaluation question 2.

Overall, respondents believe that UNFPA is performing well in its upstream work.

In many areas across the LNOB spectrum of work, UNFPA is investing in normative support for policy-level change. As an example, the 2023 'We Decide' report highlights a key area of focus for future work as being advocacy and policy dialogue for strengthening disability-inclusive gender-based violence and SRHR programming.²⁸¹ Respondents report an understanding of transformative change as meaning changing the policy landscape at all levels – subnational, national, regional and global – and UNFPA staff across the board understand that genuinely transformative and sustainable change at the policy level should be driven by civil society partners representing those who are furthest behind and who know the needs of those furthest behind.

The evaluation found that adapting to local contexts and amplifying trusted, context-relevant voices or instruments significantly enhances the impact of UNFPA's upstream work. In regions where global human rights agendas are perceived as externally driven, the evaluation found that locally grounded actors often carry greater influence. Conversely, in contexts like Central Asia, alignment with global human rights instruments has served as a motivating factor for government engagement. These variations highlight the importance of tailoring advocacy approaches to local realities in order to foster sustainable, transformative change.²⁸²

Several examples of good practice in linking upstream and downstream programming, as well as combining mainstreamed and targeted approaches was found in the Latin America and the Caribbean region and in the country case studies.²⁸³ UNFPA's longstanding support to indigenous leadership to engage in regional human rights mechanisms has contributed to the issuance of 'General Recommendation No. 39 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on the Rights of Indigenous Women and Girls (2022)'. UNFPA and the Network of Afro-Latin American, Afro-Caribbean, and Diaspora Women engaged with the Mechanism to Follow-up on the Implementation of the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (MESECVI), which issued a recommendation on preventing gender-based violence towards women of African descent, with UNFPA support (2023).²⁸⁴ Similarly, in the resolution of the Fifth Session of the Regional International Conference on Population and Development, there is a specific paragraph that establishes an open-ended group of friends of the Chair on the rights of persons with disabilities to assess inclusion strategies, in close collaboration with UNFPA.²⁸⁵ UNFPA LACRO made efforts in establishing a network of organizations representing women with disabilities, providing them with training, information and advocacy tools, leading to

281 UNFPA (2023). The UNFPA We Decide Programme: A Catalyst for Disability Inclusion.

282 See UNFPA EECARO regional programme evaluation, 2024.

283 LACRO case study report

284 MESECVI/CEVI (2023). MESECVI Recomendación General nro. 5 Violencia de género contra las mujeres afrodescendientes.

285 ECLAC (2024). Fifth session of the Regional Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean RESOLUTION 5(V).

an unprecedented level of participation by these organizations in both the Montevideo Consensus Presiding Officers meeting (Santiago 2023) and the Cartagena Regional Conference (2024).²⁸⁶

At the country level, there are also strong examples of UNFPA's normative upstream work on the LNOB agenda across all three case studies of this evaluation. In Pakistan, UNFPA has a significant upstream focus and an LNOB lens allows the country office to advocate for change while supporting government efforts. Examples where LNOB and RFB aspects have been integrated into policy documents with the support of UNFPA, include the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Reproductive Act, which articulates a key focus area as being: "reach[ing] the underserved by increasing access to the disadvantaged, hard to reach, and vulnerable including poor women and remote marginalized areas by strengthening community-based reproductive health services in addition to other responsibilities"²⁸⁷ the Sindh Reproductive Health Act, which articulates as a key focus area to "reach underserved persons by increasing access to the disadvantaged and vulnerable by strengthening the basic health units, rural health centres, maternal and child health (MCH) centres, family welfare centres for the provision of family planning, maternal and neonatal healthcare, in addition to other services",²⁸⁸ and the National Midwifery Framework, which highlights that a key purpose of this framework is to be able to provide adequate numbers of midwives in relevant locations for "the provision of equitable access to quality care, and life-saving interventions, even in hard-to-reach areas, leaving no one behind".²⁸⁹

In Malawi, UNFPA has worked successfully with the Government of Malawi to create an enabling environment for left-behind groups to receive access to a broad range of services in different settings.²⁹⁰ UNFPA has experienced advocacy success in ensuring the prioritization of different LNOB groups through the review and creation of policies. It has ensured legal access to contraceptives for adolescents without consent from adults, and special treatment for pregnant adolescents.²⁹¹ UNFPA has supported the crafting of the National Youth Policy (2022–2027) and implementation plan, which are frameworks designed to advance the development of adolescents and youth.²⁹² Through UNFPA support, the Government of Malawi was able to finalize the review of the learner readmission policy to strengthen systems and processes for readmitting girls who drop out of school due to pregnancies and early marriages. Advocacy successes have also been recorded from UNFPA provision of budget analysis for parliamentarians to lobby for more resources, including for LNOB groups.²⁹³

286 UNFPA LACRO KII, FGD Persons with Disabilities.

287 Government of Pakistan (2020). The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Reproductive Healthcare Rights Act.

288 Government of Pakistan (2019). Provincial Assembly of Sindh Notification, Karachi, the 10 December 2019. The Sindh Reproductive Healthcare Rights Act.

289 Government of Pakistan (n.d.). National Vision and Midwifery Strategic Framework for Pakistan.

290 UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Malawi Annual Report 2021 - Accelerating the Three Zeros.

291 UNFPA (2020). UNFPA Malawi Annual Report 2020 - Delivering during COVID-19.

292 UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Malawi Annual Report 2021 - Accelerating the Three Zeros.

293 UNFPA (2020). UNFPA Malawi Annual Report 2020 - Delivering during COVID-19.

Informants at both global and regional levels highlight the very real challenges that exist for UNFPA in normative-level work on some of the more controversial left-behind factors. But the fact that challenges exist does not make it any less UNFPA's role to lead on this. In Bangladesh, there is limited work on LGBTQIA+ issues, but some work on transgender issues that are not criminalized in the same way as homosexuality is. The transgender work is important and UNFPA has also partnered with UNAIDS for programming and supported the UNCT to advocate on these issues.²⁹⁴ This, of course, does not really help those in the country who are homosexual rather than transgender. At the regional level, respondents highlighted the specific dangers of UNFPA being the lone voice on this issue and suggested that when there are Resident Coordinators who are particularly brave, then advocating for groups that are criminalized under national laws becomes easier. However, this is rarely seen.²⁹⁵

While UNFPA has demonstrated strengths in this area, informants at global and regional levels highlight that UNFPA's normative work continues to face significant challenges when addressing certain controversial left-behind factors – particularly around LGBTQIA+ inclusion. In many regions and countries, these issues remain politically sensitive and are often seen as 'non topic' or off-limits for UNFPA.²⁹⁶ For example, in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (EECARO), projects such as the 'CISPop' initiative exclude LGBTQIA+ populations from programming and data due to donor or government restrictions.^{297,298} This limits UNFPA's ability to fully implement an inclusive LNOB agenda, especially where such data gaps reinforce structural exclusion.

Overall, the upstream work of UNFPA presents an opportunity for transformation on a society level. This is particularly pertinent when it is equally matched with social norm change and conducted through the model of partnerships with both civil society and governments, while seeking in each particular context, the best way to leverage different voices to maximize transformative change. This presents differently across different contexts, and is dynamic. What is common across most contexts is that there are some factors – age, gender, disability status, for example – that cause limited concerns for advocacy and policy dialogue. Those that are left behind tend to be so due to government inaction or intent and, for some, such as adolescents and youth, or those with disabilities, there is no specific intent against these groups as a whole, just a basic neglect of their needs. However, for other factors – migration status and LGBTQIA+ status, for example – the rationale for being left behind can often be one of intent rather than inaction. For many governments, refugees, asylum-seekers, immigrants and even forcibly internally displaced populations, can be highly politicized, and are marginalized

294 UNFPA country level KIIIs.

295 UNFPA regional KIIIs.

296 UNFPA regional KII.

297 UNFPA regional KIIIs.

298 UNECE (2021). Keeping Count. Conducting the 2020 round of population and housing censuses during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/publications/keeping-count>.

and discriminated against by design. While UNFPA has a role to play with these population groups, UNFPA does not lead in any way within the United Nations system on these population groups and therefore is perhaps best placed to provide services where possible (being responsive) but without the granted mandate to try and be more transformative. However, the factor of gender identity and sexuality – LGBTQIA+ status – is inherently and directly within UNFPA's mandate and these groups often face direct and intentional discrimination, marginalization and exclusion from governments. It is the role of UNFPA to advocate for these groups.

4.5 Evaluation question 5: Efficiency

To what extent has UNFPA efficiently allocated resources – financial and human – to furthering the LNOB Operational Plan and goals?²⁹⁹

Feminist principles applied: empowerment and capacity building questions on HR and employing persons from left behind groups, and social justice and accountability for financial resource allocation.

Finding 15: UNFPA headquarters made a modest initial investment³⁰⁰ in LNOB efforts, funding the development of the LNOB Operational Plan and prioritization tool. While these efforts were robust and sustained for some time, the current internalization of LNOB, specifically in terms of allocation of financial and human resources, does not align with the commitments to LNOB in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 or in the LNOB Operational Plan.³⁰¹

Links to assumptions 5.1 and 5.3

299 Assumptions: 5.1 The internalization of LNOB principles, including specifically: (a) allocation of earmarked funds; and (b) allocation and training of staffing for operationalization of LNOB across different modes of engagement has been implemented consistently and efficiently across different levels of UNFPA (country, regional and global); 5.2 UNFPA systematically and proactively seeks to employ persons from left-behind groups; 5.3 UNFPA has an efficient organizational structure for the implementation of LNOB strategies and approaches; 5.4 UNFPA recognized and efficiently addressed the internal barriers to the LNOB approach, including (a) people-related: change of mindset, insufficient staffing, vertical working, guidance fatigue, lack of clarity on priority groups; and (b) organizational issues: lack of strategic focus, inclusivity gaps, lack of clarity on support from UNFPA headquarters, and the fact that the UN does not speak as one voice; 5.5 UNFPA has the capacity to monitor, collect and disaggregate its data and results to assess existing inequalities and ensure UNFPA reaches specific groups that are the furthest behind.

300 The UNFPA Gender and Human Rights Branch invested \$40,000 over three years to carry out an LNOB assessment and develop the LNOB Operational Plan and the prioritization tool.

301 Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, the two thematic case studies, the LACRO regional case study and the Pakistan country case study. While the qualitative evidence for this finding is strong, the evaluation team were unable to access clear financial data (given the migration of UNFPA financial data from Atlas to Quantum over the temporal scope of this evaluation and the LNOB tag for programming data in Atlas no longer corresponded to financial data, meaning it was not possible to do a full financial analysis).

The principle of LNOB is a clear focus of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 but, to date, the resourcing is inconsistent with the focus. UNFPA funded the development of a strategy and a comprehensive prioritization tool, but support for the roll-out of this has not been strong and so it has not taken hold across the agency. The commitment to LNOB within the current UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 is clear:

In its organizational effectiveness and efficiency plan, UNFPA commits to institute measures to leave no one behind by building in-house expertise and promoting inclusive practices that accelerate the mainstreaming of disability into UNFPA programming and operations, including by providing more accessible facilities and information. UNFPA commits to using a marker to track financial resources used to prioritise leaving no one behind (financing).³⁰²

At the global level, the ethos of reaching the furthest behind is evident in resourcing. The UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 resource allocation model is one of a “three-dimensions, two-adjustments and one-floor approach”,³⁰³ with a normative floor of \$500,000 per year for every country. Countries are categorized into tiers based on three dimensions: (1) distance from achieving the three transformative results; (2) health inequalities; and (3) vulnerability. Tier 1 countries (those most vulnerable, with the most health inequalities, and the furthest away from achieving the three transformative results) receive a minimum of 60 per cent of all UNFPA core resources, with Tier 2, and then Tier 3 countries receiving proportionally less. This resource allocation model represents a deliberate effort to embed LNOB into institutional decision-making and financial planning. This approach has also resulted in increased allocations to small island developing states, which often experience acute vulnerabilities despite their small population sizes, further reinforcing UNFPA’s commitment to reaching those most at risk of being left behind.

However, this resource allocation design can also be seen as challenging for the principles of LNOB, as countries with good indicators across the three transformative results or Sustainable Development Goals (particularly 3 and 5) at the national level often hide pockets of significant inequality with specific population groups within the country being left quite far behind. Tier 3 countries, with overall good average achievements against transformative result indicators tend to be more UMICs that struggle to raise other resources for programming or policy work, and this is where specific population groups can be extremely disadvantaged and intentionally and systemically marginalized.

Within respondents from UMICs for this evaluation there was concern that the LNOB agenda risks losing momentum within UNFPA due to insufficient reinforcement. In addition, the lack of a strong knowledge management culture and system within UNFPA is also seen as a key barrier to scaling up LNOB efforts.³⁰⁴ Respondents highlighted

³⁰² UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs for the UMIC and low fertility case study.

that corporate know-how and innovations at the country office-level are not being adequately captured, often resulting in country offices developing interventions from scratch. For example, while informants are aware that UNFPA has previously worked on comprehensive sexuality education for persons with disabilities, systematized knowledge on this is not readily available, which hinders the efficiency and effectiveness of country offices that are advancing related interventions.³⁰⁵ Respondents suggested that UNFPA needs to be more agile in regard to knowledge sharing, and move beyond the good practices model strictly based on successes, as learning from mistakes can also drive innovation at the local level.³⁰⁶

The commitment articulated in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 has not necessarily been translated into explicit systematic financial resource support at all levels. While LNOB is, as a concept, very well embedded throughout UNFPA programming, both upstream and downstream, this has not been driven or supported by adequate financial resources.³⁰⁷

For a lot of UNFPA programmes reaching the most marginalized, there is a reliance on donor funds (for example, the female genital mutilation and child marriage programmes, and disability inclusion programming).³⁰⁸ For comprehensive sexuality education work, all funding is from external donors.³⁰⁹ Even for areas where there are donor funds available, the time-bound restrictive nature of these funds push for a more ‘quantitative-countable’ responsive approach. However, what is required instead is transformative social norm change as well as policy-level change that will make a long-term sustainable difference, and can really be understood as a genuinely LNOB approach. Even for population groups that are palatable to donor funds, the nature of the “other resources” (OR) project cycle is such that transformative action is difficult to achieve. Then, of course, there are the population groups that are not particularly palatable to where limited other resources are available, they are at the whim of changing global political landscapes and interests. There are some exceptions to this rule, for example, in ESARO where UNFPA secured long-term (10 years) funding from Switzerland and then the Netherlands for disability inclusion work.³¹⁰ Similarly, LACRO secured medium term (four years) funding from Luxembourg for work around people of African descent and then more from Ireland.³¹¹

Other challenges exist given the nature of the funding cycle: even where countries have raised other resources to support the implementation of LNOB, in the absence of specific core (regular) resources to do so, programmes are limited in size, scope, funding and duration. It is not possible to do anything remotely transformative with \$200,000 over a two-year period. So, with these other resources, UNFPA can certainly

³⁰⁵ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs for the UMIC and low fertility case study.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

³⁰⁸ UNFPA global and regional KIIs.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ UNFPA regional KIIs.

³¹¹ UNFPA global KIIs.

support some service delivery to certain populations, but no more than this³¹² – and this should be considered targeted programming rather than an LNOB programme.

The evaluation also noted that efforts to support more transformative, user-led programming are influenced by the structure of UNFPA's funding and financial accountability systems. With over 70 per cent of its resources classified as 'other resources' – voluntary, often earmarked, and short-term in nature – UNFPA faces limitations in offering flexible, long-term funding to partners. These structural factors present challenges to fully operationalizing long-term, locally driven approaches and should be taken into account when assessing the feasibility of scaling transformative LNOB programming.

For humanitarian situations, while targeting the most vulnerable for access to services is a foundational principle of humanitarian action, there is a sense that UNFPA does not explicitly invest regular resources in this for humanitarian programming. In general, there is limited 'regular resource' (RR) budget funding that goes to humanitarian programming and all humanitarian respondents see this as a challenge. In many offices, humanitarian action is seen as an 'extra', and one that is well-funded through other resources, and so not something that requires core allocation. One respondent referenced a country office with a significant humanitarian crisis where there was one humanitarian logistician, but five people working on adolescent sports programming. Most regional offices have only one regular resource-supported humanitarian staff member, with all others being funded through other resources and so, transitional or temporary.³¹³ The question, of course, is: given that being in a humanitarian situation is an LNOB factor in itself, before other factors of gender, age, disability etc are added, are current resource allocation decisions, with limited resources going to humanitarian situations, even in the spirit of LNOB?

As an outlier, corporate backing, coupled with prioritization of specific groups and favourable national contexts, has been considered crucial to achieving results for furthest-behind groups in Latin America and the Caribbean. In LACRO, an LNOB team with dedicated funds has been created, with focal points to work with key groups (people of African descent, persons with disabilities, adolescents and youth, and indigenous peoples).³¹⁴

Another challenge centres around understanding the balance of reaching those furthest behind and reaching more people. Respondents report that not enough has been done to help countries understand and navigate the tension between reaching the furthest behind (with an understanding that the hardest-to-reach are usually the costliest to reach, per head) or reaching more people (who all have needs) with the same pot of money. There is no guidance for UNFPA country offices on this balance.³¹⁵ Further, there are no specific indicators for Country Representatives with regard to

³¹² UNFPA country level KIIs.

³¹³ KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian staff at global, regional and country levels.

³¹⁴ LACRO case study report

³¹⁵ UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIs.

how much LNOB work has been conducted within the country. The way LNOB has been framed, despite its prominence in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, is as an additional, optional approach.³¹⁶

LNOB has recently undergone restructuring as part of a broader organizational shift within UNFPA. While it is too early to assess the full impact of these changes, initial developments appear promising. **The establishment of a dedicated LNOB unit that encompasses all the various dimensions and population groups under the LNOB agenda is widely viewed by stakeholders as a positive and necessary first step toward more coherent and coordinated programming.** As with any area of work though, structure has to be supported by investment in the right technical skills, in sufficient quantity at different levels. Many respondents at the global level feel that the creation of the new Human Rights, Gender, and LNOB Branch is a positive move forward, although there are also some doubts, and some concerns that adding LNOB onto the end of a large branch name does not provide LNOB with the status conferred on it by commitments in the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. The other issue is that human rights and gender are both quite programmatic-focused areas of work, while, as per the LNOB Operational Plan, LNOB is supposed to cut across programmes and all operations as an institutional commitment.³¹⁷

Respondents at regional and country levels have less understanding of the restructuring at the global level and what it means for them, so do not have clear opinions.³¹⁸ However, there is a clear idea that LNOB will not be properly operationalized under the vision of the LNOB Operational Plan with the current structure and resourcing in place. As previously noted, the ambition of LNOB for UNFPA is not supported by investment, and without specific LNOB advocates – dedicated, not double-hatting, and at a level with authority to make things happen – at strategic levels across regional offices and country offices, then the ambitions of the LNOB Operational Plan will not be realized. In some regional offices, there is confusion as to who is meant to be the LNOB focal point right now. Most country offices, even if they have an appointed focal person, do not have anyone leading and coordinating the work. While LNOB is a concept that needs to be mainstreamed through all aspects of work (across the five modes of engagement externally, but also internally through everything that UNFPA does), it does not become institutionalized at all levels without intentional investment in staffing positions to oversee, coordinate and push the agenda forward.³¹⁹ In addition to this, there is a need to map, cost and recruit for the right technical skills to push this forward, linking back to the last finding, pairing the need for skillsets with the diversity that will ensure UNFPA is ‘walking the talk’ when it comes to LNOB.³²⁰ This is not an easy thing to do, and likely will cut across more than one strategic plan cycle, so it would need to be a clear, conscious, long-term commitment from UNFPA.

³¹⁶ UNFPA country level KIIs.

³¹⁷ UNFPA global KIIs.

³¹⁸ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

Challenges in getting the right structure for LNOB persist. For example, despite good progress in LACRO there are ongoing challenges in ensuring optimal institutional structure to promote LNOB work. LACRO has experimented with structuring the LNOB work within the teams in different manners, providing important reflections on how to find an optimal structure to promote LNOB work. The capacity to be flexible, adapting to search-enhanced working arrangements, is deemed positive by informants. During the 2021-2023 biennium, an LNOB area, with a dedicated budget and a team of focal points, was responsible for advancing work with specific groups, namely indigenous people, people of African descent and persons with disabilities, following the priority groups established by the Visibility-Inclusion-Participation Strategy. This arrangement played a crucial role in prioritizing those groups and ensuring that they remained at the forefront of the organization's efforts and has enabled strong specialized advocacy efforts, allowing the organization to foster regional networks and partnerships, as well as targeted policy dialogues.³²¹

However, this approach also presented its drawbacks, with UNFPA staff reporting a perceived disconnection from programmatic areas, hindering the coherence of LNOB efforts across the mandate areas.³²² From 2023 onwards, LNOB focal points were integrated into programmatic areas to enhance LNOB mainstreaming as an accelerator across all UNFPA programmes and actions, including in budgets. UNFPA LACRO informants assess that the new arrangement also presents challenges, highlighting risks related to LNOB becoming an add-on and ending up deprioritized, while also making resource allocation to the LNOB agenda more challenging. The lack of clear oversight and accountability on LNOB efforts is seen as a main challenge to keeping the LNOB momentum and avoiding setbacks. Overall, there is an emerging assessment that still more thought is needed to arrive at an optimal arrangement that allows for intersectionality.

At the country level, a significant issue is the reliance on focal points to drive implementation, often without the authority, resources or cross-functional support to mainstream LNOB effectively. In smaller country offices, staff are taking on multiple focal point roles, which sometimes are not even a fixed attribution.³²³ In Türkiye, LNOB does not fall to a focal point, but rather has become the focus of most country programming.³²⁴ Other challenges exist across internal structures. In Pakistan, for example, internal challenges for UNFPA include a fragmentation of efforts across various initiatives and workplans within the country programme document, which results in siloed approaches. Additionally, the data systems do not produce the monitoring data necessary to effectively track LNOB factors across the country programme. A repeated issue raised by UNFPA Pakistan staff was that LNOB is embedded within specific indicators against specific outputs for specific outcomes

321 KII UNFPA LACRO and UNFPA Latin America and Caribbean regional programme 2022-2025.

322 Ibid.

323 Independent evaluation of the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025. <https://www.unfpa.org/independent-evaluation-unfpa-strategic-plan-2022-2025>.

324 Türkiye country case study report.

which are, necessarily, siloed across different UNFPA areas of focus. This leads to a more siloed approach to LNOB with different teams working in isolation rather than collaboratively, hindering the country office's ability to implement a cohesive strategy that maximizes impact.³²⁵ Key informants for this country case study identified many opportunities for cross fertilization that have not yet been leveraged, including synergies among thematic areas, but they also reported that coordination is lacking due to overstretched portfolios and the lack of an 'umbrella office' approach (such as a dedicated work planning session about relevant business units around persons with disabilities, as an example).³²⁶

Overall, the general lack of resource support, integration into accountability frameworks, and reliance on donor funds, when balanced with the challenges LNOB brings, have contributed to the limited way in which the well-designed LNOB Operational Plan has been institutionalized and implemented. These challenges are compounded by the complex and cross-cutting nature of LNOB, which requires coordinated leadership and ownership across offices and levels to be sustainably embedded into UNFPA systems and practice.

Finding 16: UNFPA has initiated more sophisticated efforts for diversity, equity and inclusion within the workforce at the policy level, but these policies do not go far enough nor have they, to date, been fully rolled out in practice.³²⁷

Links to assumption 5.2

UNFPA has made great efforts at the global level on diversity, equity and inclusion but the positive results from these are yet to filter down to country level. A new staff position at headquarters was created under the current UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 to monitor the principle of diversity inclusion within UNFPA, as a key part of the UNFPA 2030 People Strategy³²⁸ and there have been significant efforts made in this area. For example, UNFPA now has a diversity, equity and inclusion webpage that shows some LNOB factors within the workforce.³²⁹ As highlighted in Figure 15 below, UNFPA is transparent in exhibiting the ratios of men to women personnel, of women in leadership positions, of personnel who have a disability, of personnel who self-identify as LGBTQIA+, and of personnel who are indigenous or native peoples.

³²⁵ Türkiye country case study report

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, the two thematic case studies, the LACRO regional case study and good practice from the Türkiye case study

³²⁸ UNFPA global KIIs.

³²⁹ UNFPA (n.d.). Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is at the heart of UNFPA's workforce. <https://www.unfpa.org/diversity-equity-inclusion>

Figure 15: UNFPA diversity, equity and inclusion webpage



Source: *Self-reported survey data (52% personnel response rate) as of October 2023. Includes all personnel types.

** Human Resources analytics reported as of December 2024. Includes all personnel types with the exception of staff members who are on secondment or loan, those on special conditions (such as special leaves without pay on a *lien post*) and consultants.

The UNFPA 2030 People Strategy integrates the different categories of: (a) racism (“calling in” the ‘calling out’’); (b) disability (representation); (c) LGBTQIA+ (“safe to be me”); (d) gender (“going beyond the numbers”); (e) generations (power equity); and (f) +more (“I am not a single story”).³³⁰

The diversity, equity and inclusion team also conducted checklists on different human resources processes to ensure every internal human resource process is more inclusive. Inclusion at Work is a new initiative that intends to foster a more inclusive culture at UNFPA and to help different offices apply diversity, equity and inclusion principles. All of this is commendable, but challenged by the limited resources provided to it, there being only one staff position dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion in the whole agency. This has implications across different levels and contexts. For example, in UMIC, country offices are making progress in hiring people from groups that are furthest behind, especially persons with disabilities. However, significant challenges related to accessibility and inclusiveness remain. Country offices in Eastern Europe and Central Asia have made progress in employing persons with disabilities and persons from the Roma ethnic group (for example, from Belarus, North Macedonia and Uzbekistan).³³¹ Although recruitment of those furthest behind has been undertaken by UNFPA country offices, it often depends on leadership at individual offices and has so far been mainly limited to work on the LNOB agenda, rather than in broader roles.³³² The streamlining of internal inclusion policies at the corporate level (for example, reasonable accommodation policies) is seen as an important step to facilitate hiring

³³⁰ UNFPA (n.d.). Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is at the heart of UNFPA's workforce. <https://www.unfpa.org/diversity-equity-inclusion/dimensions>.

³³¹ UNFPA (2024). EECA Regional Programme Evaluation, and UNFPA Key informants.

³³² UNFPA (2024). EECA Regional Programme Evaluation.

at country level.³³³ Still, diversity of staff, especially in the representation of different groups, ethnicities and religions, is considered an area that UNFPA should advance in a more intentional way.

Accessibility has been reported as a major issue, as office spaces are not disability friendly. In North Macedonia, hiring a person with a disability prompted the office to invest in renovations and adaptations, with support from headquarters. Contract modalities have also been highlighted as a significant challenge for inclusion – not only due to formal recruitment requirements that do not account for diverse experiences, but also because benefit structures vary. This is particularly noticeable for caretakers of persons with disabilities; while some staff enjoy comprehensive entitlements, such as health leave and special education for dependents, these benefits are not universally available. Informants acknowledge that working with persons with disabilities has contributed to heightened awareness of the often-invisible barriers to inclusiveness those persons face, and that UNFPA should make further strides in becoming more accessible and inclusive, especially given its role in advising governments on inclusion policies.³³⁴ Box 9 has a further example of good practice.

Finally, while informants recognize UNFPA's responsiveness to creating a more inclusive and diverse workplace, the pace of change is seen as not consistent enough to transform the organizational culture. Examples of efforts at the regional level include, for instance, the EECARO task team on internal disability inclusion and the Asia Pacific Regional Office's (APRO) initiative on building capacity and sensitizing UNFPA regional and national staff, on ensuring an inclusive and non-stigmatizing workplace, including acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons.³³⁵

Box 9: Good practice - Promoting workforce diversity and inclusive culture in Türkiye

In Türkiye, UNFPA has taken deliberate steps to foster a diverse and inclusive internal culture within its country office. While no formal strategy was identified for the systematic employment of left-behind groups, staff interviews suggest that the organization has created an environment where diversity is valued and inclusion is actively supported.

Several staff members shared that they identify as part of marginalized or discriminated-against groups, such as religious minorities, and reported that they “feel included” working at UNFPA. Informants also highlighted that, unlike many United Nations agencies where staff often come from higher socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, UNFPA in Türkiye stands out for its diversity of expertise and lived experience. This includes the recruitment of staff who have worked extensively with marginalized communities, particularly those coming from non-governmental organizations and civil society sectors. In some cases, this

³³³ EECARO (2023). Annual Report 2024.

³³⁴ UNFPA EECA KIIs.

³³⁵ UNFPA (2024). APRO Annual Report, 2023; EECARO (2024). Annual Report, 2023.

experiential knowledge has been prioritized over formal academic qualifications, adding valuable grassroots perspectives to programming and policy discussions.

Moreover, UNFPA's role in advancing inclusion within the broader United Nations system is evident in the appointment of a UNFPA staff member as the UN-GLOBE focal point for Türkiye. This focal point has led sensitization and training efforts on LGBTQIA+ inclusion for other United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS). Feedback from participants indicates these efforts are appreciated and contribute to a more inclusive workplace culture across the UNCT.

While staff emphasized that transformational change would take time – especially in a context of increasing conservatism and associated risks to marginalized groups – UNFPA's practices in Türkiye illustrate a meaningful commitment to internal inclusion, diverse recruitment, and peer-to-peer learning within the United Nations system.

Although there is general agreement that UNFPA should push further in recruiting individuals from furthest-behind groups, affirmative policies remain a point of contention. Some believe that positive discrimination should not be a criterion in international recruitment, while others argue that such measures may be more appropriate at the national level to ensure fair representation and opportunities.³³⁶

In LACRO, UNFPA has made efforts to diversify its teams and there is a clear sense that representation matters, as it directly impacts the relevance of the UNFPA LNOB approach, in addition to fulfilling the principle of 'nothing about us, without us'. However, structural challenges still prevent people from left-behind groups from entering UNFPA and, just as importantly, feeling included. While there have been advancements, significant structural challenges remain in hiring and promoting the inclusion of various furthest-behind groups. Although precise data are unavailable, UNFPA informants perceive progress in the representation of people of African descent and of persons with disabilities within the organization over the past 20 years, though setbacks have been perceived more recently regarding persons with disabilities. Indigenous representation remains low across the organization, but is more evident at the country level. UNFPA informants also perceive that the presence of indigenous people and people of African descent is higher at the project or operational levels than within programme teams.

UNFPA respondents clearly view representation as crucial, as it introduces standpoints rooted in the personal experiences of left-behind groups. This not only enhances the relevance and appropriateness of programming but also raises awareness about inclusion within UNFPA teams. External stakeholders similarly see representation as a key factor in improving UNFPA's response to left-behind groups, fostering increased

³³⁶ UNFPA EECA KII.

sensitivity and understanding of the realities faced by those furthest behind.³³⁷ Age group representation is also seen as imbalanced, with lower representation of both young and older individuals. It was reported that the hiring policy lacks specific criteria for promoting the inclusion of young people, while the mandatory retirement policy at age 65 systematically excludes a growing population group.³³⁸

In humanitarian settings, recruitment of those who identify from left-behind groups within UNFPA's humanitarian response is at a similar level as for UNFPA more generally. Where it has happened, the culture within UNFPA has not always been sufficiently welcoming for those with certain factors. Recruitment has multiple dimensions and increased affirmative action, or positive discrimination efforts are not necessarily supported by all. However, diversity of staff, properly representing different groups (ethnicities and religions for example) is considered critical, and something that some respondents understand does not always happen organically but needs intentionality behind it – in the form of some kind of affirmative action.³³⁹

Many respondents spoke to the fact that, when the basics are not in place, for example, accessibility for persons with physical disabilities, then attitudinal issues are not the primary focus, and this is perhaps another circular issue, for if attitudinal issues were addressed, there would be more momentum, desire and effort to address infrastructure barriers. In some ways, perhaps, a focus on infrastructure challenges conceals a deeper issue on mindset and values clarification.³⁴⁰

Finding 17: All staff across different levels (country, regional and global) report that the issue of values clarification (that is, about what UNFPA core values are) is a concern that should be addressed as a priority.³⁴¹

Links to assumption 5.2

One of the most significant challenges raised by respondents is on attitudes of some staff in country offices who hold culturally conservative views, at odds with the HRBA of UNFPA. This is the most significant internal challenge reported by respondents to this evaluation. Some suggest that recruitment practices at the national level focus on those with the requisite education to do the job, and therefore a relatively limited and elite pool of candidates are being recruited who may still have some blind spots to certain issues of exclusions and discrimination. This is understandable

³³⁷ FGD groups in Panama, KII Government and CSO Panama.

³³⁸ UNFPA LACRO KII.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ For this finding, the evaluation is deliberately only presenting information from the global and regional KIIs and document review, and the two thematic case studies given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, and to ensure utmost protection and confidentiality across all country and regional case studies. The evaluation team believes the evidence to be robust, and for this to be a strong and important finding for UNFPA.

and by no means unique to UNFPA: it is reported as a challenge across the United Nations system. However, it is a challenge that should not be ignored as it has serious implications.

A number of respondents at the global, regional and country levels noted that there are individuals within UNFPA whose perspectives on certain aspects of the organization's mandate, particularly regarding LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights, may differ from the organization's core position.³⁴² Further, at the country level, many respondents have reported a continuation of exclusive and exclusionary attitudes among some staff more broadly. Despite staff being trained on principles of diversity, equity and inclusion, there appears to be limited progress in implementing practical measures to foster a more inclusive environment.³⁴³ However, there are notable exceptions, such as an increasing number of country offices conducting disability accessibility assessments of current office premises, although these efforts have not always led to any changes to employment practices.³⁴⁴

Attitudinal change is complex and difficult, but ongoing sensitization to the mandate and the mission must form part of a strategy to address internal barriers, together with diversifying the workforce however possible, while ensuring recruitment is fit for purpose and those hired have the minimum required capacities to do the job.

In Latin America and the Caribbean and in West and Central Africa regions there have been deliberate efforts to recruit people from indigenous communities, despite there often being a need to adjust educational requirements, showing there is potential for this to be managed.³⁴⁵ But as referenced above, attitudinal change, both in terms of staff attitudes to other colleagues and staff attitudes to those communities UNFPA is mandated to protect and assist, can still remain a challenge. UNFPA has conducted events, workshops and trainings to try and mirror the positive behaviours UNFPA is seeking, but this is still a work in progress.³⁴⁶

In 2021, UNFPA conducted a global staff survey, which provided a mix of results. One area of concern was a question on whether UNFPA is considered to be an inclusive workplace for people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, with only 35 per cent responding positively, 49 per cent responding neutrally, and 16 per cent responding negatively. The open question on any other thoughts or comments yielded an 11 per cent response on unequal treatment and harassment.³⁴⁷

While the 2024 global staff survey did not include a direct question on LGBTQIA+ inclusion as in 2021, a new disaggregated question sheds light on staff perceptions of equality across multiple identity characteristics, including religion, gender, ethnic origin

³⁴² UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIs.

³⁴³ UNFPA country level KIIs.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

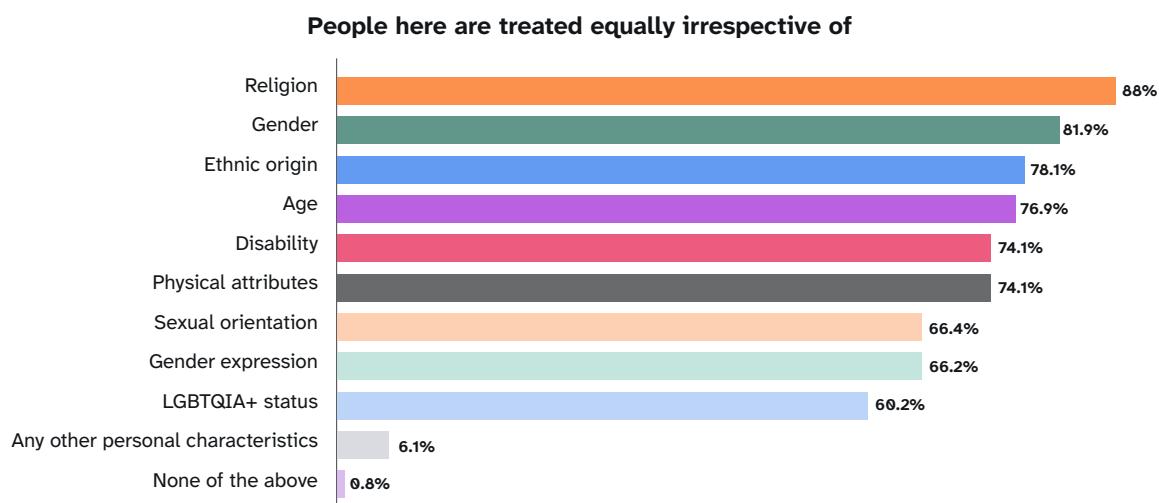
³⁴⁵ UNFPA regional KIIs.

³⁴⁶ UNFPA global KIIs.

³⁴⁷ UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Global Staff Survey 2021. Presentation of key results.

and LGBTQIA+ status to name a few. Notably, only 60.2 per cent of respondents agreed that people are treated equally regardless of LGBTQIA+ status – the lowest rating among all identity categories listed. Similarly, perceptions of equal treatment based on sexual orientation (66.4 per cent) and gender expression (66.2 per cent) also ranked among the lowest. Although this reflects a marked improvement from the 35 per cent positive response in 2021, the results of the 2024 survey indicate that LGBTQIA+ staff and those with diverse sexual orientation or gender expression may still face greater barriers to inclusion. These findings underscore the importance of targeted measures to ensure that the principle of leaving no one behind is fully realized within UNFPA's internal culture.

Figure 16: Staff perceptions of equal treatment across identity characteristics



Source: UNFPA global staff survey 2024 (question 10).

Findings from the 2023 EDGEplus survey on UNFPA workplace diversity further reinforce patterns of uneven staff experiences across different identity groups.³⁴⁸ The results highlight persistent disparities, particularly among women who identify as LGBTQIA+, women with a disability, and women who are nationals of countries other than their duty station. These groups reported lower confidence in promotion systems, access to training and protection from retaliation. Moreover, women overall continue to report less favourable perceptions of work-life balance and leadership support. Similarly, non-binary staff and respondents from younger age cohorts expressed lower levels of satisfaction across several inclusion-related indicators. While based on self-reported data, these findings offer important insights into the intersectional dimensions

³⁴⁸ EDGEplus is a certification that builds upon EDGE Certification to measure and analyse the intersectionality of gender with other dimensions of diversity, including race, ethnicity, gender identity, LGBTQ+ status, nationality, age and disability. UNFPA is the first UN agency to obtain EDGEplus certification in 2022. In 2024, UNFPA obtained EDGE Move certification, the second level of EDGE certification, obtaining EDGE Assess certification in 2022.

of equity and inclusion within UNFPA's workforce, and suggest a need for targeted, systematic efforts to strengthen UNFPA's existing diversity infrastructure and policies.

In this evaluation, respondents generally show limited support for implementing a more assertive affirmative action or positive discrimination staffing policy, though many acknowledge the need for greater diversity in staffing. At regional and country levels, some respondents believe that there should be a more intentional policy for reaching out to minority groups and there are instances across different offices (country and regional) of where someone with a disability, or someone of a specific ethnic minority, was employed, usually to work on programmes reaching persons with disabilities, or people of specific ethnic minorities.³⁴⁹ However, in certain regions, challenges remain in even achieving gender balance. For example, despite the global overall figures presented on the UNFPA diversity, equity and inclusion webpage, in West and Central Africa the overall workforce is only 39 per cent women, with even fewer women in senior roles across the region.³⁵⁰ In this region, there is a systemic issue with women receiving the educational attainment levels necessary for many positions within UNFPA. This reflects the broader challenge in diversifying the workforce in a meaningful and intentional way, without an explicit affirmative action policy. Currently, such an approach does not exist, and the foundational attitudes within the organization necessary to support it are not yet in place. Across all regions, some respondents raised concerns about age-related biases, discrimination based on sexual orientation, and challenges related to accessibility or inclusion for persons with disabilities within the organization.³⁵¹

Within humanitarian settings, there is some hope that the application of humanitarian principles has the potential to be more effectively leveraged for positive impact on attitudinal bias. There is an understanding within UNFPA humanitarian staff that attitudinal staffing barriers go beyond that which training alone can change when it comes to providing full, comprehensive and non-discriminatory services to certain population groups.³⁵² As highlighted above, there are staff across UNFPA, not just in the humanitarian sphere, who inherently disagree with the UNFPA mandate and values on issues such as LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights.^{353,354} There is a clear call from respondents for an ongoing, well-designed and resource-supported values clarification internal programme, and there is a sense that the use of humanitarian principles, even if applied outside of pure humanitarian programming as well, could be a useful foundation for that programme. Some ad hoc regional attempts

³⁴⁹ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

³⁵⁰ UNFPA regional KIIs.

³⁵¹ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

³⁵² KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian staff at global and regional levels.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ UNFPA Global Staff Survey 2021.

have been made to date, for example a training provided in Kenya, which the regional office staff in West and Central Africa are keen to also use. However, if UNFPA is serious about LNOB then a more comprehensive, global, consistent, funded and ongoing approach is needed. LNOB must start with values clarification for all staff across all offices.

Finding 18: There are two additional key internal efficiency challenges. One is linked to the intersecting challenges of measuring: (a) outcome rather than output results; and (b) more qualitative transformative change. The other is robust financial controls that limit genuinely transformative funding practices.³⁵⁵

Links to assumptions 5.4 and 5.5

There are some challenges with monitoring results that hinder a clear picture of UNFPA's success with reaching the furthest behind. The UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 Integrated Results and Resources Framework (IRR) articulates indicators at different levels for the results of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 – specifically, at output, outcome and goal levels. The framework “supports disaggregation by sex and one or more of the UNFPA ‘left furthest behind’ factors and characteristics: gender; age; culture, ethnicity, race, language and religion; disability; location; migration, asylum, refuge, and displacement status; key populations; socioeconomic status and related factors; other factors such as HIV and AIDS.”³⁵⁶ The results framework also includes four indicators that capture work and results related to disability.

The focus of the output indicators on addressing factors and characteristics linked to discrimination and exclusion are designed to allow UNFPA to measure the extent to which UNFPA is reaching those furthest behind.³⁵⁷ However, despite this, UNFPA is struggling to understand the data on who has been reached, and who has not, across all different countries of operation. There is a specific challenge identifying and being able to analyse the intersectionality of factors and how multiple dimensions of vulnerability may intersect.³⁵⁸

Responses to the evaluation online survey highlight that the biggest gap from the perspective of country offices is documenting good practice. Figure 17 below highlights the differences across regions in terms of familiarity with the LNOB Operational Plan as per the online survey results.

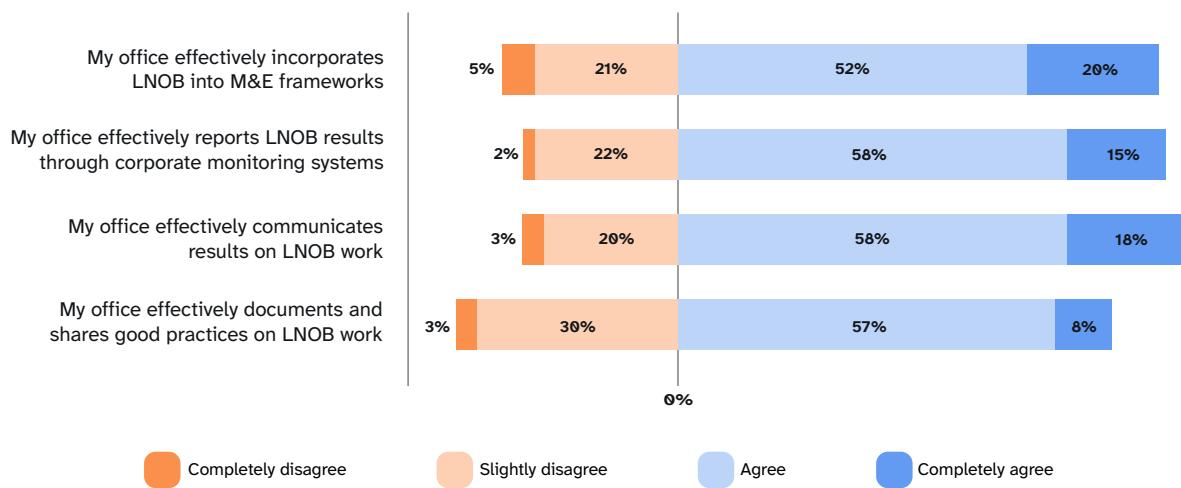
³⁵⁵ Evidence comes from the global and regional KIIs and document review, the two thematic case studies, and the LACRO regional case study.

³⁵⁶ UNFPA (2021). UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 Integrated Results Framework.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ UNFPA regional and country level KIIs.

Figure 17: UNFPA capacity to monitor, document and communicate UNFPA's LNOB work



Source: Evaluation online survey results (question 13).

Ultimately, there is a clear sense across UNFPA that there is not the capacity to generate, collect, monitor and disaggregate sufficient quality LNOB data as a comprehensive whole across the organization.³⁵⁹ Beyond this, though, there is no consensus on what reporting data are necessary, and how best to show results within the reality that, perhaps, the data being sought can never be attained in any kind of cost-effective, time-effective or safe manner. Understanding the inherent challenges and being transparent about limitations of actual data (and where statistical modelling, interfacing with qualitative voices and inputs, needs to be included in the calculation) is maybe a more realistic option to pursue.

In some UMICs, UNFPA has made progress in specifying indicators and targets for the furthest-behind groups in its country programme documents. For example, the Albania country programme document includes specific baselines and targets in its IRRF for access to healthcare for poor individuals and for Roma and Egyptian communities. Similarly, North Macedonia has identified priority vulnerable groups in its support for the operationalization of the Government's programme to ensure access to contraception, reflected at the indicator level in the IRRF.

Likewise, Iran has included in its IRRF a target related to households headed by women benefiting from the single window of social services. It is worth mentioning that country offices acknowledge that naming specific groups in country programme documents depends on negotiations with governments, which do not always allow for such specifics.

However, monitoring LNOB and RFB-related results remains a challenge. UNFPA informants agree that LNOB measurement frameworks are often overlooked during

³⁵⁹ UNFPA global, regional and country level KIIs.

the development of initiatives, hampering UNFPA's capacity to demonstrate outcomes and impact. This is particularly evident in upstream work. The absence of indicators to measure institutional change resulting from advocacy efforts also limits UNFPA's ability to assess the effectiveness of its normative role.³⁶⁰

In LACRO, a predominantly UMIC region, while there have been advancements in monitoring outputs, outcome-level monitoring is still incipient. UNFPA has made progress in building corporate capacities to implement the LNOB Operational Plan and countries have refined their targeting, integrating the LNOB approach across outputs and advancing in both mainstreamed and targeted programming.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain in scaling up and fully operationalizing the approach consistently across country offices. While the LNOB Operational Plan has been crucial in establishing a comprehensive and appropriate vision to guide LNOB efforts, and elevating LNOB as an accelerator in the current UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which has helped push the agenda, a lack of clear mechanisms and detailed guidance for programming, implementation, monitoring and – equally important – communicating LNOB work and results, remain.

Conversely, for UNFPA in humanitarian settings, measuring, identifying and reaching the furthest behind, and particularly the challenges associated with this, is linked into last-mile efforts and humanitarian access. Last-mile delivery for humanitarian assistance is often implemented through partners and, while this is a good example of localization, it means that measuring effectiveness and reach with credible humanitarian response data is difficult. In recent years UNFPA has introduced a comprehensive Excel-based monitoring system for results reporting for humanitarian settings, but challenges remain in collecting the data, particularly with regard to denominator data (for example, UNFPA has reached X number of adolescents in need in a particular humanitarian area, but out of how many?). Further challenges include disability identification, with a focus on permanent, visible, physical disabilities rather than any other kind of disability, despite Washington Group questions being increasingly utilized.³⁶¹

The annual UNFPA humanitarian action overview report provides consolidated results,³⁶² but these results are not disaggregated by factors of exclusion or marginalization, therefore reflecting the challenges associated with measurement. UNFPA informants and external stakeholders have provided numerous examples of how capacities to enhance inclusivity have been developed by engaging with the furthest behind and addressing their diverse needs.³⁶³ Practical lessons learned include: fostering meaningful inclusion and accessibility at in-person and online events; providing accessible documents; and budgeting for LNOB-related activities, among others.

360 UMIC thematic case study.

361 KIIs with UNFPA humanitarian staff at global, regional and country levels.

362 For example, UNFPA (2023). Humanitarian Action Overview 2023: this provides results for overall numbers of women and girls reached with different services in humanitarian settings in 2022.

363 KII UNFPA LACRO, FGDs Panama and Costa Rica.

There are also clear issues linked to robust controls within financial procedures that limit genuine transformative funding structures. UNFPA is not alone in the fact that funding processes and requirements are not favourable to small, grassroots, user-led organizations. This is a challenge across the United Nations system, and a major impediment to the meaningful implementation of the localization agenda.³⁶⁴

The United Nations has strong anti-fraud processes in place that are reliant on the type of detailed financial reporting that small, user-led organizations cannot manage. The processes are in direct contradiction to a genuine localization effort, where sustainable transformative impact is achieved at the community level by redefining power and voice and placing user-led civil society in direct control of development within their context. However, that shift of power necessarily means more power and control to civil society and less power and control to the United Nations agencies providing the funding, and no United Nations agency is able to fully manage that right now. The result is small grants (often of \$50,000 or less) to user-led civil society organizations for defined activities for a short period of time. The prioritization of financial control over flexible, empowering partnership models limits the potential for longer-term, transformative programming. Without a shift in the thinking, and a willingness to recalibrate risk tolerance, the transition from responsive outputs to more sustainable, community-driven outcomes may remain out of reach.

Transformative change means, necessarily, working with staff and civil society partners that are more connected to groups that are left behind ('nothing for us without us') and that also means, necessarily, reducing expectations of reporting. There is a leap of faith requirement for true transformation. However, UNFPA also has an accountability to donors: the fine line between these two issues is something that UNFPA has not quite managed to achieve to date.

In recognition of these constraints, the Division for Management Services (DMS) has taken steps to reduce the administrative burden on partners funded on a smaller scale (below \$100,000 per year). Recent changes include lifting mandatory micro-assessments, spot checks and audits, and a proposal to raise the threshold for capacity-building grants from \$30,000 to \$100,000. These measures are intended to enable a more enabling environment for user-led civil society organizations and local actors to participate meaningfully in UNFPA programming.

Notably, 86 per cent of all partner funding in the past year was directed to non-governmental organizations, reflecting a strong emphasis on civil society engagement. However, the implementation of these measures also presents new challenges. The potential for mismanagement and fraud remains a real and significant risk – one that carries operational and reputational implications. These dynamics highlight the complexity of balancing the goals of localization with the need for robust accountability and risk management, and raise important considerations for how UNFPA can

³⁶⁴ United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (2019). Localizing the 2030 Agenda: Building on What Works. <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/exchangeforum/#:~:text=Localizing%20the%202030%20Agenda%20is,to%20local%20needs%20and%20aspirations>.

responsibly advance toward more transformative, locally driven partnerships. Good examples exist. Outside of UNFPA, a good example is the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), a multi-agency United Nations trust fund, hosted by UN Women, which provides direct support (not only activity-level support, but also institutional funding) to women-led civil society organizations engaged in humanitarian and peace activities. While funding remains small, the model allows for a shifting of power to the civil society level, and results are promising.³⁶⁵

Within UNFPA, there is a working group reviewing finance and policy procedures and seeking to restructure, as much as possible, funding modalities to enhance working with smaller civil society organizations. UNFPA recognized this means less heavy-duty reporting.³⁶⁶ However, for this to be expanded to the level where transformative change can be seen, the process requires advocacy upstream to donors to help donors understand that sometimes the best results will be achieved through shifting power to those who do not have the capacity to prove the results in a robust quantitative manner. Other ways of ensuring compliance must be considered. Whatever those other methods may be, there is an understanding within UNFPA that, currently “our oversight is killing us”.³⁶⁷



³⁶⁵ United Nations Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (2024). Evaluation of the United Nations Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) 2019-2023.

³⁶⁶ UNFPA global KII.

³⁶⁷ UNFPA global KII.

05

Conclusions

Conclusion 1

UNFPA has taken meaningful steps to integrate the principle of LNOB across its strategic, programmatic and operational work, with growing evidence of internalization at country and regional levels. However, sustaining this momentum will require strengthened institutional ownership, clearly defined roles and robust accountability mechanisms across the organization.

Links to findings 1, 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17

At UNFPA, the principle of LNOB is aligned with UNFPA's mandate and is inherently reflected in its efforts to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights for all, particularly for those most at risk of exclusion.

The evaluation found that LNOB is widely understood and appreciated within UNFPA as an accelerator towards the transformative results and, in particular, for advancing Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 5. Even before the introduction of the accelerators, UNFPA has, particularly in its programmatic efforts, instinctively incorporated LNOB into the planning and implementation of programmes across various contexts and levels. Although there is limited evidence that the LNOB Operational Plan itself has consistently driven or amplified these efforts, it is apparent that UNFPA already operates in a strongly favourable programmatic environment in which LNOB principles can thrive and within which the LNOB Operational Plan can be effectively implemented.

While awareness of the LNOB Operational Plan is uneven across the organization, this has not prevented the meaningful application of the principle of LNOB. Many country and regional offices have advanced LNOB through other strategic and operational entry points such as country frameworks, regional strategies and context-specific approaches. This reflects a growing internalization of LNOB across the organization, despite the uneven uptake of the LNOB Operational Plan itself.

However, the responsibility for advancing LNOB has largely rested with focal points or has progressed through the initiative of individual country offices or technical units, mainly driven by specific staff commitment. Often, focal points are expected to lead implementation without the necessary authority, dedicated resources, or cross-functional support required to mainstream LNOB effectively.

A more sustainable and systemic approach would require broader institutional ownership. This includes clearly defined roles and accountability mechanisms for key divisions to support integration through strategic planning, resourcing, technical guidance and oversight functions. Without such an organization-wide commitment, the LNOB agenda at UNFPA risks remaining a well-intentioned initiative rather than a fully institutionalized driver of change.

To realize the transformative promise of LNOB, it must be understood and acted upon as a shared responsibility – prioritized and embedded not only in programme design, but across leadership, operational systems and strategic decision-making processes at all levels of the organization.

Conclusion 2

UNFPA's advancement of LNOB is supported by a forward-looking strategic framework that provides a strong foundation for driving the agenda forward. However, to realize the full potential of LNOB within the organization will require more consistent and improved resource allocation to support its effective implementation, as well as a clearer approach to workforce diversity and values clarification to foster an inclusive and enabling internal environment.

Links to findings 15, 16, 17

UNFPA has made notable progress in advancing LNOB through a balanced LNOB Operational Plan that addresses both its programmatic and operational aspirations for leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind. Recognizing LNOB as integral to its transformative results has reinforced its strategic relevance and facilitated its integration into UNFPA's institutional priorities and operational decision-making. Overall, the LNOB Operational Plan is considered a significant and very positive development by stakeholders.

However, while there is a clear articulation of LNOB commitments in both the UNFPA Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the UNFPA LNOB Operational Plan, these have not yet been systematically reflected in financial or human resource allocation. This gap has limited the effectiveness of the LNOB Operational Plan's implementation and, without greater alignment, may hinder its overall impact.

Embedding LNOB within UNFPA's systems and culture will require deliberate investment in inclusion, staffing and organizational values. Internally, many UNFPA staff emphasized the importance of values clarification – particularly around LGBTQIA+ inclusion – as a critical enabler of an inclusive workplace culture that is aligned with the LNOB principle and that supports its mandate in a manner that is inclusive, rights-based and free from stigma. These cultural dimensions are closely linked to workforce diversity. As a workforce becomes more diverse, organizational values naturally tend to evolve, creating opportunities for mutual learning and inclusion. However, this also creates a circular challenge – for new staff from diverse backgrounds to feel safe,

welcome and respected, there may need to be a shift in the organizational culture and values first.

The UNFPA 2030 People Strategy is a positive step in addressing these challenges, but its full implementation is needed. Effectively addressing these challenges will mean going beyond training and awareness initiatives. It will require thoughtful reflection, sustained commitment and the allocation of dedicated resources to foster a workplace that fully embodies the LNOB principle.

Conclusion 3

UNFPA adds unique value in advancing LNOB through two key areas: its convening role, which enables the furthest behind to be heard at the highest levels; and its role in generating and supporting the use of population data, which enhances the visibility and inclusion of those at risk of being left behind.

Links to findings 12, 13, and 14

Each United Nations agency approaches and addresses the principle of LNOB through the lens of its specific mandate. The evaluation found that across all country contexts, UNFPA consistently adds distinct value and is widely recognized – either implicitly or explicitly – as an agency that goes above and beyond others to reach the most marginalized, the most vulnerable and the most excluded populations.

UNFPA offers two significant key areas of added value. The first is its convening role, which allows civil society organizations, particularly those that represent the furthest behind, to engage at the highest policymaking levels. This function is closely linked to its ability to link upstream normative work and downstream programming, which is highly valued across all contexts. While some challenges remain – particularly in politically sensitive environments or where civic space is limited – UNFPA's efforts contribute to ensuring that the needs and voices of those furthest behind are reflected not only in direct programming support, but also in broader policy frameworks, thus creating opportunities for transformative change.

The second area where UNFPA provides significant added value is in its contributions to the visibility of different groups, particularly though supporting the generation and use of disaggregated population data. These data are essential across all settings not only to know who is being included, but also to understand who is being excluded. Importantly, strengthening the generation and use of disaggregated population data is essential not only for tracking progress toward the transformative results, but also for monitoring broader Sustainable Development Goal progress and guiding targeted actions to ensure no one is left behind across the development goals.

There is an opportunity to enhance this work by fostering a more strategic system-wide discussion about what type of data it is realistically possible to collect, given practical constraints like costs, capacity, political sensitivity and data availability. Such a discussion could involve prioritizing the most useful and actionable data,

acknowledging the limitations of what can be consistently or ethically collected, and exploring alternative approaches to address data gaps. These may include innovative uses of existing population datasets, complemented by other forms of evidence such as algorithm-based extrapolations, rational assumptions and lived experience. Such approaches can help balance data accuracy and cost efficiency, providing a stronger foundation for programme planning and evidence-informed decision-making.

Conclusion 4

LNOB implementation across various contexts presents both opportunities and challenges, with UNFPA's strong collaboration with civil society emerging as a key strength. To ensure LNOB remains relevant, UNFPA must evolve and adapt to varying needs, particularly in high-need and humanitarian settings, empowering communities and shifting power dynamics towards locally led solutions.

Links to findings 7, 8, and 10

While acknowledging variations in operating contexts, the evaluation identified several recurring themes around the implementation of LNOB. A notable strength for UNFPA is how well it works with civil society, which is essential to its efforts to reach the furthest behind. While the types and level of engagement may vary across contexts, UNFPA's strong partnership with civil society is seen as a valuable asset and an area that UNFPA can build upon to strengthen its LNOB outcomes.

In upper middle-income countries (UMICs), the value of LNOB in achieving the transformative results is particularly evident. In these settings, implementing transformative LNOB programming requires the creation of collaborative spaces, fostering active engagement with communities and civil society, and a commitment to humility and attentive listening. These approaches help to ensure that the perspectives of local communities are meaningfully integrated into programme design and implementation.

In humanitarian contexts or settings with particularly high needs, the principle of LNOB remains equally critical, though its practical application is more complex. Widespread needs and limited resources make it more difficult to distinguish and prioritize the furthest behind. Staff often face operational tensions between focusing on those most in need and maximizing broader reach. Additionally, the LNOB Operational Plan does not reflect key dimensions of LNOB in UNFPA's humanitarian response, including the necessity for life-saving prioritizations and clear formalized responsibilities. This gap makes it challenging to fully integrate the LNOB Operational Plan into UNFPA humanitarian response programming.

Additionally, common external barriers – such as shrinking civil society space, political sensitivities and the limited availability of reliable disaggregated data – complicate efforts to effectively implement LNOB strategies. Many staff members express the view that there is insufficient corporate support and flexibility to effectively navigate

these challenges, which limits the agency's ability to fully realize its LNOB potential in some contexts. While UNFPA's strong engagement with user-led organizations reflects a strong commitment to localization, these partnerships can also carry operational and reputational risks, particularly where financial oversight capacity is limited. These dynamics highlight the need to balance locally driven programming with institutional accountability, and to clarify UNFPA's risk tolerance and expectations for transformative change within existing funding controls and constraints.

Taken together, these findings underscore that LNOB cannot be approached as a uniform, one-size-fits-all model. UNFPA's approach to LNOB requires context-specific adaptation to ensure its relevance and effectiveness across diverse settings. LNOB, at its core, is not solely about decentralizing operations; rather, it is about fundamentally shifting power dynamics to support locally driven solutions and empowering local communities to design and implement solutions that best address their needs. This is key to ensuring that marginalized communities are not only included in development processes, but more importantly lead in shaping development outcomes. A key challenge lies in balancing these shifts with institutional accountability. When effectively managed, LNOB can help to further advance UNFPA towards the transformative results and support the broader objectives of the 2030 Agenda, both of which aim to secure inclusive and equitable outcomes for all.

Conclusion 5

The integration of LNOB principles is inherent in UNFPA's work, primarily through responsive programming. While this approach is effective, it does not always foster transformative change, which requires longer-term, user-led and partnership-driven efforts.

Links to findings 2, 4, 5, 6, 18

UNFPA is an agency that, in many ways, embeds the principles of LNOB across programming quite naturally and intuitively, guided by the ethos of ICPD and its Programme of Action. This framework prioritizes SRHR for all, with a specific focus on the more marginalized and left-behind people in society, who face significant barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services and who are often stigmatized and excluded from accessing their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

While LNOB principles are integrated throughout UNFPA programming, this tends to be more through responsive programming that focuses on addressing immediate needs, rather than through transformative programming that addresses underlying systemic inequities. Responsive programming is necessary and valuable, but it does not inherently challenge or change the root causes of exclusion. To realize the full promise of LNOB, transformative programming – grounded in a rights-based, intersectional approach that targets gender and systemic power imbalances – is essential for achieving lasting, long-term change.

There are many challenges, however, with genuine transformative programming. First, transformative change takes time, and the commitment to long-term societal change often conflicts with institutional donor funding cycles, which prioritize short-term, measurable results. Second, long term societal change can be difficult to measure and attributing progress to a particular programme, actor or donor is challenging. These issues complicate both resource mobilization and the measurement of results, making it harder to sustain and scale up transformative efforts. Third, genuine transformative programming cannot be effectively implemented by one actor alone. It requires both vertical and horizontal partnerships, including strong collaboration within the United Nations ecosystem. Moreover, what is considered transformative at an individual level – such as the provision of previously unavailable services – may not be transformative at a societal level, where structural changes are required. This distinction is not always clearly understood or consistently applied across UNFPA programming.

Lastly, genuine transformative programming also depends on the leadership and participation of those most affected. This implies a greater role for user-led civil society organizations in designing, implementing and monitoring interventions. However, United Nations financial risk-mitigation controls can limit funding practices that enable such transformative change. Inadvertently, these controls can create barriers that limit the ability of UNFPA and its partners to embrace the flexible, long-term funding mechanisms necessary to drive genuine, user-driven transformation. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that UNFPA operates within the constraints of its own funding model, with over 70 per cent of its resources classified as other resources funding (that is, voluntary and often earmarked funding). These limitations affect UNFPA's ability to offer the sustained, flexible financing that transformative change requires. As such, future efforts to expand transformative LNOB programming should be grounded in a realistic assessment of institutional capacities and funding conditions. Only through these efforts can LNOB move beyond responsive programming and become a powerful driver for inclusive, lasting change.

Conclusion 6

The LNOB Operational Plan is an important positive step for UNFPA, promoting inclusion and empowerment, but UNFPA needs clearer guidance on the additional focus on factors and stronger integration with human rights-based approaches to fully address structural inequalities.

Links to findings 1, 2, 4, 11

The LNOB Operational Plan is widely regarded as thoughtful and human-rights based, which is a commendable achievement. There are several reasons why it is a significantly positive step for UNFPA. First, it introduces the additional lens of factors that, while not without challenges, is holistic and inclusive. Second, the overall ethos of the LNOB Operational Plan, being one of inclusion, empowerment, genuine engagement and accountability, is both ambitious and worthwhile. Embedding this ethos across all

aspects of UNFPA's work is essential not only for advancing the agency's transformative results, but also for contributing to the achievement of the broader goals of the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, the alignment of the LNOB Operational Plan with feminist and transformative concepts sets UNFPA apart from other United Nations entities, positioning it as a potential leader in this area. This is further exemplified by the relocation of the Programme Division and Independent Evaluation Office to Nairobi, which underscores the agency's commitment to localization, a central principle of LNOB, reinforcing UNFPA's credibility.

Despite these strengths, the conceptual shift from focusing on groups to the inclusion of factors has caused some confusion within UNFPA. This shift, complicated by the varying levels of awareness of the LNOB Operational Plan across global, regional and country offices, has created uncertainty about whether factors should replace groups in all aspects of LNOB programming and implementation. In practice, both are necessary and can be used concurrently and symbiotically. Additionally, the existence of other UNFPA guidance, strategies and plans for specific groups, such as those focused on persons with disabilities, has led to ambiguity at the country level as to how these documents relate to the LNOB Operational Plan.

Another important area for clarification is the alignment of the LNOB Operational Plan with human rights-based approaches and the broader objectives of addressing structural inequalities. While these concepts are referenced in the LNOB Operational Plan, they have not been fully integrated into the broader LNOB discourse within UNFPA. This has led to some important unresolved questions: Is LNOB the end goal? Is RFB a means of achieving LNOB, or is LNOB itself a means to a broader effort to address structural inequalities and ensure the full realization of rights for all? Clarifying these questions and the relationship between these concepts would help strengthen the conceptual foundation of LNOB at UNFPA and guide its implementation more effectively.

© UNFPA Central African Republic/Karel Prinsloo



06

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, which were derived from the findings, draft recommendations were developed by the evaluation team. These recommendations were refined through multiple consultations with the Steering Committee and Evaluation Reference Group for this exercise to ensure they are relevant, actionable and aligned with the evaluation's objectives.

Each recommendation includes a detailed set of proposed actions, priority ranking, implementation timeline, and identification of the relevant business unit(s) responsible for implementation.

Recommendation 1

UNFPA should strengthen institutional accountability to LNOB by embedding it across corporate systems, roles and decision-making processes – ensuring it is prioritized as a core accelerator and enabler of its Strategic Plan and the achievement of the UNFPA's transformative results.

Links to conclusions 1, 2, 5, 6

Priority: High

Due by: July 2026

Lead units: LNOB Team, Programme Division

Additional units: Office of the Executive Director, Division for Human Resources, Division for Management Services, Media and Communications Branch, Regional Offices

Key actions

1. Embed LNOB priorities into business unit workplans and performance management systems;
2. Mainstream LNOB considerations into corporate planning, budgeting and results and accountability frameworks;
3. Promote visible leadership commitment to prioritizing LNOB as a core organizational objective across all levels and functions;
4. Review and strengthen the institutional LNOB structure including regional focal points to provide enhanced support and resources for LNOB work and the focal point structure at the country level;

5. Enhance cross-functional coordination and internal knowledge-sharing platforms to support coherent and consistent implementation (see also Recommendation 3);
6. Incorporate LNOB into onboarding and staff development (see also Recommendation 2).

Recommendation 2

UNFPA should seek to enhance diversity and embed LNOB values within its own staffing structures and human resource practices to ensure greater alignment with its organizational goals of inclusion and human rights.

Links to conclusions 1, 2

Priority: High

Due by: July 2026

Lead unit: Division for Human Resources

Additional units: LNOB Team, Programme Division, Ethics Office, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment team, Regional Offices

Key actions³⁶⁸

1. Define LNOB-specific values, distinct from overarching UNFPA values derived from the competency framework and develop a global human resources statement. This statement should reflect UNFPA's commitment to upholding human rights principles across all regions, while also addressing the need for values clarification in relation to local cultural contexts and global human rights standards. It should also align with organizational values and practices, emphasizing the importance of inclusion, diversity, equity and human rights in staffing decisions;³⁶⁹
2. Disseminate the statement across all offices and integrate it into human resources training and onboarding processes, making it a core component of staff orientation to ensure understanding, alignment and consistent application of these values across the organization;
3. Make values clarification an ongoing commitment, with a series of activities and events beyond webinars and training sessions. This should be a priority for senior management, with efforts initially focused on them and then extending to lower levels of the organization. Additionally, UNFPA should introduce a tracking process (for example, staff survey) to assess alignment with LNOB values, with clear action points where misalignment is demonstrated;
4. Ensure that human resource actions outlined in the LNOB Operational Plan are reviewed and implemented where possible;³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ These key actions should be cross-checked with the UN-wide strategies, which offer practical advice on how to build a positive working environment for people who identify with LNOB factors.

³⁶⁹ This should be developed collaboratively between the Programme Division and the Division for Human Resources, whereby the Programme Division should lead on clarifying LNOB specific values, and DHR should lead on the operationalization and application of those LNOB values.

³⁷⁰ The status of each action will be further discussed by DHR to determine feasibility and next steps.

5. Conduct a mapping across country and regional offices to assess current efforts to actively encourage recruitment from left-behind groups, focusing on removing barriers for recruitment of people from diverse backgrounds across various organizational areas (for example, not hiring persons with disabilities only for disability-focused programmes);
6. Develop a comprehensive human resources recruitment policy that adheres with the United Nations Charter, Staff Regulations and Staff Rules but includes as far as possible mandatory requirements for all country and regional offices and headquarters, as well as suggested actions, to prioritize recruitment of individuals who experience factors identified by UNFPA as contributing to being furthest behind (for example, disability, age, gender identity, among others). This policy should be reviewed and revised after five years, with additional mandatory requirements introduced based on the outcomes of a subsequent mapping;
7. Conduct a mapping of all offices to identify physical barriers to accessibility, along with an internal review to capture other barriers (for example, attitudinal). A plan should be developed to address these barriers, understanding that infrastructure changes may take time, but ensuring accessibility across all locations.

Recommendation 3

UNFPA should enhance internal integration of LNOB throughout all of its policies and external communications to ensure a clear, consistent and cohesive approach to LNOB.

Links to conclusions 1, 3

Priority: Low

Due by: March 2026

Lead unit: LNOB Team and Programme Division

Additional units: Media and Communications Branch, Regional Offices

Key actions

1. Develop a workplan to ensure that LNOB is coherently, comprehensively and consistently integrated into all relevant organizational policies across all divisions;
2. Define and communicate a clear vision for UNFPA to continue its strong and recognized role within the United Nations system for advancing LNOB, with a focus on leveraging its strong convening role and population data capabilities;
3. Develop an outward-facing LNOB document that serves as a coherent guide for how UNFPA staff explain their approach to LNOB to all external partners;
4. Develop a strong economic argument and value proposition for LNOB, highlighting the impact of including previously excluded population groups in development. This should include a concise, accessible briefing paper for the internal learning series (see Recommendation 4) and a more comprehensive external-facing document to support advocacy and resource mobilization efforts.

Recommendation 4

UNFPA should develop a series of programmatic issue papers that are practical, short and informative as part of an internal LNOB learning series.

Links to conclusions 4, 5, 6

Priority: Medium

Due by: July 2026 to align with Recommendations 1 and 2

Lead unit: LNOB Team

Additional units: Division for Human Resources, Programme Division, Humanitarian Response Division, Innovation Unit

Key actions

1. Develop a schedule for the learning series of issue papers³⁷¹ that outlines topics and timelines. The LNOB learning series should be rolled out over the course of one year, with periodic updates;
2. Collect all current learning documents and guidance on LNOB (such as the FAQ on LNOB) and, building on these, develop a series of short (2-4 page) issue papers. Examples of suggested topics below;
3. Disseminate the issue papers regularly and track feedback for continuous improvement;
4. Monitor and assess the impact of the series, adjusting content as needed based on input from regional and country offices;
5. Provide a platform for regional and country offices to share their experiences and learnings related to LNOB (for example, communities in UNFPA Lumapps).

Suggested topics for issue papers

- What is transformative? A discussion of what is transformative at societal level versus what is empowering at an individual level (so more responsive than transformative) and what this looks like in different contexts.³⁷² This should include building on the historical strength of UNFPA in working on gender-responsive approaches.
- How brave is UNFPA? A discussion on key issues of LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights. What UNFPA is doing, and where, and what UNFPA could be doing. What is needed? How much can country offices do and what headquarters support is needed. Where are partnerships?

³⁷¹ Two key points on these issue papers: First, UNFPA should ensure that the voices of those who identify with left-behind factors are involved in the papers, i.e. as a review committee. Second, UNFPA should consider innovative and digital ways of presenting the topics, such as video, interactive platforms, 'podcast' type formats, with a final note that can be saved to a global central Google drive folder for future reference.

³⁷² This issue paper could take the transformative continuum used in this evaluation and expand upon this, with some of the examples provided in this evaluation.

- What is meaningful? When we speak of meaningful participation and involvement, what do we mean by meaningful?³⁷³ Is meaningful participation the end in itself, or a means to an end, and if so, how is that defined?
- How is LNOB balanced with value for money and reaching more people for the same amount of money? What is the economic argument or economic value proposition?³⁷⁴
- LNOB in UMIC and low fertility settings. What does this look like? What are the specific challenges and opportunities?
- LNOB in settings of high need? What does this look like? What are the specific challenges and opportunities?
- LNOB in humanitarian settings: how do accountability to affected populations and localization approaches link and overlap with LNOB in humanitarian settings? How is the LNOB Operational Plan applicable to humanitarian architecture, terminology, structures and processes? Also, this paper should highlight what localization means for UNFPA – and is localization an end in itself, or a means to an end, and if a means to an end, what is the end?
- LNOB across the HDP continuum: how does LNOB fit in with continuum working across humanitarian, development and peace?
- LNOB and how it aligns with other accelerators.³⁷⁵
- UNFPA and its normative, convening role. How to bring civil society to the table to further the LNOB agenda? How to manage power dynamics? Transferring power to civil society is the goal but transferring power means yielding control and this can have challenges (what happens when civil society partners have values that are not aligned with UNFPA values?).
- LNOB and population data. What innovative or alternative approaches can be used to address data gaps – such as modelling, estimates, or proxy indicators – so that the lack of detailed population data does not continue to hinder effective LNOB programming? What is realistically feasible in the short and medium term?
- LNOB and results measurement. How can you measure transformative change? What proxy indicators can be used? How can qualitative indicators be used more effectively?
- LNOB and resource mobilization. What are the key challenges with donors? How can these be overcome?

³⁷³ Note that the adolescent and youth team have done work on this, and this links to recommendations in the 2022 UNFPA adolescent and youth evaluation, which could be helpful and could be built upon.

³⁷⁴ See Recommendation 4, for more information on this.

³⁷⁵ Noting that this will have to align with the framing of the new Strategic Plan 2026-2029.

Recommendation 5

UNFPA should build on its existing partnership strategy by identifying specific actions to leverage each partnership type more effectively in advancing LNOB. This should involve aligning actions with principles of inclusion, intersectionality and human rights. Key considerations include: (a) addressing the shrinking civil space; (b) harnessing UNFPA's strong convening power; and (c) recognizing the critical role of partnerships in driving transformative social norm change. These aspects should guide the operationalization of a feminist, LNOB-focused partnership approach, building on the existing strategy as a framework for action.

Priority: Medium

Due by: July 2026

Lead unit: LNOB Team and Division for External Relations

Additional units: Programme Division, Division for Management Services (Implementing Partners), Regional Offices

Links to conclusions 3, 4, 5

Key actions

1. Review the conceptualization of partners and how best concepts of equality and respect can be integrated, including by reviewing the use of the term 'implementing' partner;
2. Review the existing partnership strategy as to how it can best be leveraged for LNOB across the four types of partners identified, adding specific key LNOB actions where possible;
3. Further explore opportunities within the current partnership strategy to enhance flexibility and shift power (which may include increasing direct funding, or decision-making authority) to localized and user-led civil society organizations, while ensuring strong financial oversight and mitigating fraud risk.
4. Develop a learning paper on UNFPA's unique added value as a convenor and bridge between civil society and government, starting with examples from this evaluation and associated case studies, and building into: (a) simple, clear, bullet-pointed actions for country offices; and (b) an engaging advocacy document for country and regional offices and headquarters to use for resource mobilization, highlighting UNFPA's key advantage in this area.

Recommendation 6

UNFPA should revisit the LNOB Operational Plan to clarify the conceptual linkages, framing LNOB as a means to achieve broader objectives – particularly the transformative results and the Sustainable Development Goals – rather than being an end in itself. Following this, UNFPA should develop a clear dissemination plan for understanding key concepts of LNOB, and strengthen its knowledge management to capture best practices, tools and strategies.

Priority: High

Due by: March 2026

Lead unit: LNOB Team

Additional unit: Programme Division, Regional Offices, Division for Human Resources

Links to conclusion 3, 5

Key actions³⁷⁶

1. Develop a comprehensive theory of change for LNOB, starting conceptually with LNOB being a means to an end, the end being addressing structural inequalities and ensuring access to human rights for all, framed around the Sustainable Development Goals and three transformative results. This should also include clear linkages to all other relevant concepts and principles;
2. Use this theory of change to highlight certain parts of the LNOB Operational Plan that are most critical for implementation and consistent understanding across UNFPA;
3. Develop further guidance around the practical application of both factors and groups simultaneously, rather than a binary approach of one of the other. This guidance should provide clear examples of how to apply both, and the benefits of using both;
4. Develop a dissemination plan and the associated key concepts within the current LNOB Operational Plan;
5. Create an online and working (ongoing, 'living') LNOB database of initiatives, including from the previous LNOB assessment and from this evaluation, and create a community of practice within LNOB focal points to update and provide regular learning bulletins, which feeds into Recommendation 3;
6. Identify datasets from other agencies that are already in operation, are regularly updated and contribute to the UNFPA approach to LNOB and then develop strategies to liaise with those agencies on that data.

³⁷⁶ In all new guidance documents and plans, UNFPA should adopt the language of "factors as well as groups" to move away from the binary approach that has characterized previous discussions. This shift will encourage a more nuanced understanding of LNOB and its application.



Driving evidence-based actions
Ensuring rights and choices for all

-  unfpa.org/evaluation
-  evaluation.office@unfpa.org
-  [@unfpa_eval](https://twitter.com/unfpa_eval)
-  [@UNFPA_EvaluationOffice](https://www.youtube.com/@UNFPA_EvaluationOffice)
-  [UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office](https://www.linkedin.com/company/unfpa-independent-evaluation-office/)