



Formative evaluation of the organizational resilience of UNFPA in light of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic

UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office

2024



Evaluation objectives and scope

Objectives

1. Assess the performance of UNFPA in responding to COVID-19
2. Analyse UNFPA's organisational capacity to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to global crises (organizational resilience)

Scope

1. Thematic: All UNFPA strategies and programmes implemented within the COVID-19 context
2. Organizational: Global, regional and country-level
3. Temporal: from March 2020 to late 2023

Evaluation sources of evidence

Desk review of UNFPA/External documentation and data

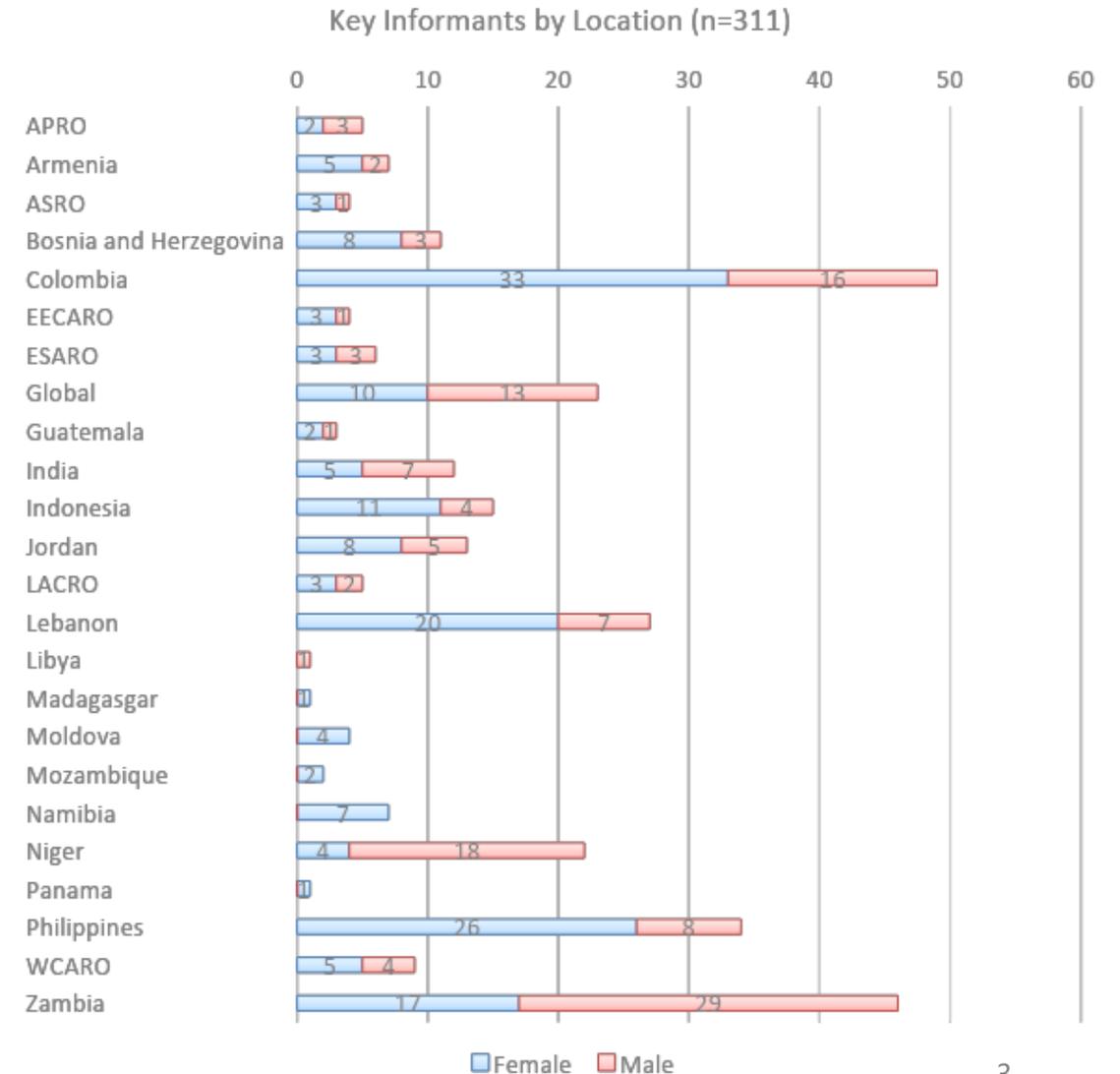
- ~ 160 core docs/datasets
- 700+ additional documents reviewed

Key informant interviews

- 190 interviews across all regions & globally
- 311 individuals
- 57 organisations/agencies

Focus Groups

- 11 Focus groups in 3 countries
- 92 community members





Conclusions

Conclusion 1

The COVID-19 pandemic served as an important test of the resilience of UNFPA, amplifying its programmatic strengths but exposing its weaknesses.



- UNFPA was agile in responding to COVID-19 while maintaining alignment with the Three Transformative Results
- Effective advocacy for the essential nature of SRHR and GBV services
- However, existing challenges around family planning, harmful practices and data were exacerbated by the pandemic

Conclusion 2

In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNFPA leveraged its inherent flexibility and the commitment and resourcefulness of its personnel to innovate across all programmatic levels.



- Business units demonstrated resilience in maintaining programme activities
- But limited realization of opportunities to work across HDP continuum as the pandemic abated
- The pandemic highlighted the contrast between development and humanitarian skills among country offices/regional offices

Conclusion 3

UNFPA made important contributions to mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on maternal health, family planning and GBV service provision and uptake, but these efforts were not commensurate with its corporate ambition.



- Key SRHR, GBV and harmful practices metrics have deteriorated
- Data strategies were also insufficiently resilient
- However, there were rapid/extensive efforts to support, sustain and ensure continuity of services to women and girls

Conclusion 4

While the COVID-19 pandemic revealed shortcomings in business continuity management, some learning from the experiences and lessons of the pandemic has taken place.



- Business continuity plans and guidance lacked the necessary elements to address the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic
- Country-level preparedness was largely based on pre-existing experience in managing crises
- New business continuity management policy and processes were developed subsequent to the pandemic

Conclusion 5

UNFPA worked to safeguard personnel and partner health, welfare and security during the crisis. Nonetheless, disparities between staff and non-staff personnel regarding safeguarding and welfare were highlighted by the pandemic, as was a lack of clarity around duty-of-care to partners, challenging resilience.



- UNFPA implemented various measures to protect the physical health and safety of personnel and thus boost resilience
- However, COVID-19 highlighted issues related to workplace culture, HR policies and management skills

Conclusion 6

There has been limited comprehensive and systematic post-crisis internal analysis and learning in terms of navigating future crises.



- Notable absence of operational reviews, including testing of resilience and preparedness measures
- Nonetheless, some good practices, policies, and strategic orientations
- But an absence of organization-wide reflection, threatening the ability of UNFPA to build on past experiences and increase resilience
- Without a more systematic approach, UNFPA risks being unprepared for future global crises¹⁰



Recommendations

Recommendation 1

In the aftermath of COVID-19, and in anticipation of future crises (including related to climate change), UNFPA should increase efforts to strengthen resilience in key mandate areas (FP, harmful practices, data)

- Invest in research on harmful practices, especially generating evidence on child marriage and FGM
- Integrate explicit resilience-building measures in country programmes and advocate for their inclusion in government policies and action plans
- Improve support to implementing partners working on UNFPA key mandate areas to build their resilience to increased needs and resource constraints in times of crisis

Recommendation 2

UNFPA should sustain and build on technical/policy work to operationalize the H-D-P continuum approach to improve resilience and mitigate disruptions to its activities and results

- Locate humanitarian and development personnel in single units or apply other strategies to reduce silos and more effectively support national emergency preparedness/response in all country contexts
- Develop a corporate strategy for strengthening UNFPA HR skills and competencies to function in crisis settings and across the H-D-P continuum

Recommendation 3

Business continuity management should become better embedded in the everyday work of all UNFPA business units

- Revise the UNFPA BCM policy and guidance to reflect BCM as an ongoing process within business that covers both operational and programmatic dimensions
- Ensure OSC is appropriately resourced to ensure effective and efficient coordination of, and capacity-building on, expanded BCM across business units and programmes
- Agreements with implementing partners should include basic provisions related to business continuity management

Recommendation 4

UNFPA should foster a workplace culture where all its personnel are appropriately supported and valued and where personnel and implementing partners are better prepared to anticipate, respond to and recover from crises

- Update and strengthen the duty of care framework for UNFPA non-staff personnel. Clearly define entitlements, benefits and support measures commensurate with the risks and responsibilities associated with the roles of staff vis a vis non-staff personnel.
- UNFPA agreements with implementing partners should include basic provisions related to partner commitments to, and capacity for, ensuring duty-of-care of their personnel.

Recommendation 5

UNFPA should take steps to improve its supply chain resilience and ensure that it is in the position to continue procuring and supplying services and goods needed for the safety and security of its personnel and for effective business continuity and humanitarian programming.

- Adapt the UNFPA corporate approach to emergency procurement and management of family planning and RH and other supplies while seeking synergies and efficiencies with other United Nations agencies and safeguarding quality
- Promptly implement the recommendations of the UNFPA audit of procurement FTPs

Recommendation 6

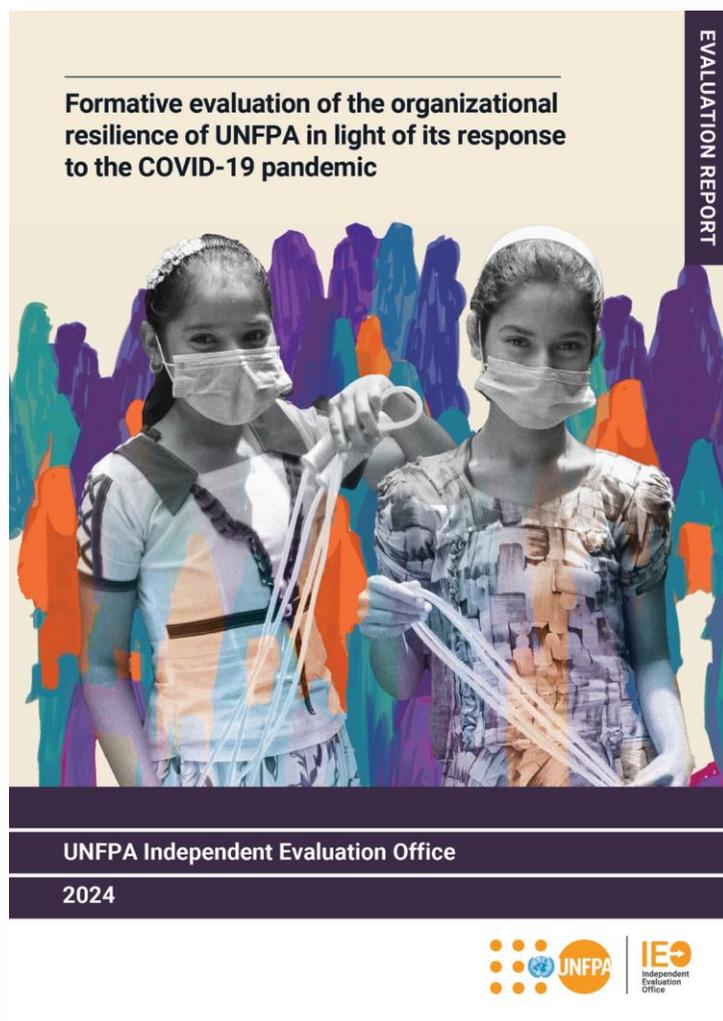
UNFPA should strengthen its systems to plan, monitor and report on results achieved in response to serious disruptions

- Embed practical, consistent and robust monitoring systems for ad-hoc/exceptional data collection and reporting requirements
- Build and resource country office and implementing partner data collection expertise and resilience via expertise in technical/digital solutions and identification of third-party monitoring providers

Recommendation 7

Systematize UNFPA organization-wide knowledge management/ learning to capitalize on innovations, maximize effectiveness and ensure no-one is left behind

- As part of a UNFPA knowledge management system, introduce a suite of rapid assessment and learning tools that can be quickly deployed to analyse, disseminate and/or scale up positive practices or lessons
- Seek to leverage existing UNFPA innovations or collaborate externally to anticipate/plan for future disruptions related to unpredictable events (e.g., pandemics) or specific planning for more likely scenarios (e.g., related to climate change)



Thank you

For more information, see the evaluation materials available at unfpa.org/evaluation

- Evaluation report
- Evaluation brief (EN, FR, SP)
- Management response
- Short video

For further information, please contact Hicham Daoudi (daoudi@unfpa.org)

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