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Evaluation

Management response to the joint assessment of the institutional effectiveness of UNDP

Context, background and findings

1. In 2016, the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) and the Office of Audit and Investigations (OAI) conducted a joint assessment of the institutional effectiveness of UNDP.¹ The assessment aimed to answer the following research question: to what extent have the measures taken since 2010, which were aimed at improving the quality of programmes, enhanced or are likely to enhance the ability of UNDP to deliver higher-quality programmes and the institutional effectiveness of UNDP? In short, the objective was to assess the extent to which policy and organizational measures, including the associated restructuring process, have enhanced or have the potential to enhance the ability of UNDP to deliver higher-quality programmes and improve its institutional effectiveness. The assessment also aimed to contribute to enhancing organizational learning by identifying opportunities for improving the organization's institutional effectiveness.

2. Overall, UNDP identified three key interrelated management results as contributing to improved organizational effectiveness in its Strategic Plan, 2014-2017: (a) higher quality of programmes; (b) greater organizational openness; and (c) improved management of financial and human resources. Organizational effectiveness and efficiency are expected to support development effectiveness, leading to and being a measure of "institutional effectiveness". The discourse of results-based management (RBM) has been part of the United Nations reform agenda since the late 1990s, and has contributed to a shift in governance and managerial focus from interventions/inputs (resources), activities and products to results.

3. The assessment covered the period 2010-2015, which included the periods of the Strategic Plans for 2008-2013 and 2014-2017. The UNDP management response (see annex) encompasses practical and time-bound key actions which build on ongoing work and designates the parties responsible for these actions.

¹ See DP/2017/21 for the executive summary of the assessment.



4. UNDP management welcomes the assessment report and appreciates the joint efforts of IEO and OAI to assess the extent to which major institutional reforms have led to a more effective and efficient organization.

5. UNDP recognizes that as a first step, the assessment process included the performance audit of UNDP RBM, conducted by OAI, which rated the UNDP system in place as satisfactory. The assessment continued with a review of the implementation of the corporate measures on quality programming and financial and human resource management, for which the joint OAI and IEO team interviewed relevant staff of regional service centres and 45 country offices.

6. During the period 2010-2015, UNDP undertook considerable policy and organizational measures, including strengthening its regional presence and consolidating policy functions that were central to the structural change process undertaken in 2014 and the set of measures piloted in 2015 to enhance the capacities of country offices and regional bureaux/hubs to deliver higher-quality programmes. Furthermore, the external context in which UNDP operates has changed during the review period, with for example the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, declining regular resources and protracted crises.

7. On a programmatic level, UNDP country programme outcomes were aligned to the outcomes of the Strategic Plan, 2014-2017, and the number of outcomes per country programme was limited to a maximum of four. Quality standards for programming were introduced at all levels, and seven quality criteria for programming were developed together with rating tools to assess the quality of programmes and projects at the design, implementation and closure stages. A revised, mandatory quality assurance process was introduced during the planning and design phase of country programmes and during the full cycle of UNDP projects. A first pilot of the new quality assurance standards was conducted in 2014, with various policies and programme measures fully rolled out in March 2016. In addition, standards for country programme documents (CPDs) and project planning and design were launched to support stronger quality programmes. In 2014 and in December 2015, the CPD template was revised to provide more specific guidance on requirements for a quality programme. A new monitoring policy was designed and rolled out, requiring collection and use of appropriate and credible data as evidence for monitoring progress, offices to adequately resource the monitoring function against annual programme delivery, and the regional bureaux to allocate at least 1 per cent of annual development expenditures to monitoring and evaluation. UNDP recognizes, however, that several areas of weakness still need to be strengthened; these are being addressed by building on existing efforts, with a continuing strong focus on ensuring higher-quality programmes through RBM.

8. UNDP management welcomes the overall conclusions that there are signs of improvements in the quality of UNDP programmes, that CPDs are more strategic and more effectively engaging multiple parts of the organization in quality assurance, and that progress has been made in the quality assurance of UNDP programmes in order to facilitate results-based programming and budgeting. Management also appreciates the assessment's findings that organizational measures such as the structural changes implemented in 2014 have clarified some roles and responsibilities between the regional and headquarters levels, and that the services provided by the regional hubs are valued by country offices.

9. While UNDP management appreciates the assessment, it notes some issues with approach, methodology and insufficient evidence to support some of the conclusions. The assessment is therefore useful, but should be considered with caution and measure. As acknowledged in the assessment, the evidence used for the report was collected too early in the reform process to make possible meaningful conclusions about the efficiency or efficacy of change measures once they are fully rolled out across the organization. Primary data were collected predominantly from users and past analysis, without gaining a full understanding of the trajectory the reforms will take by the end of the Strategic Plan period. Some of the

assessment's findings and conclusions should be contextualized appropriately and be evidence-based. The absence of such contextualization, in terms of understanding, has unfortunately resulted in findings and conclusions that would benefit from further explanation.

10. UNDP management would have welcomed more forward-looking recommendations and encouraged the inclusion of a lessons learned section in the report, particularly on the support that the RBM can provide to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and addressing the real needs of Governments, local communities and targeted populations.

11. While UNDP acknowledges the conclusions and findings of the report it has reservations on the following conclusions and findings:

(a) Management notes conclusion 1,² which states, "*The [United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks] UNDAFs and CPDs show improved alignment with the Strategic Plan priorities and an uptake of the Sustainable Development Goals, but for the most part fail to reflect the strategic comparative advantage of UNDP and how UNDP is envisaged to add value to development initiatives. The CPDs do not reflect a sufficient use and understanding of the theory of change concept that could have provided for a more integrated vision and approach,*" and wishes to highlight that the organization fully supports the joint UNDAF formulation and implementation processes. UNDP selects its programme outcomes from the UNDAF. UNDP helped to ensure that quality standards were introduced in the new UNDAF guidance, highlighting the comparative advantages of the United Nations system and the added value of individual agencies. The theory of change will be introduced in this new guidance, which will help to foster closer linkage between the UNDAF and the country programmes of other United Nations agencies. The CPD guidance and template were recently revised to include stronger guidance and clearer expectations on the added value, comparative advantages and partnership strategies of UNDP;

(b) With respect to finding 3,³ which states that "*The introduction of quality standards represented an improvement in the establishment of corporate-wide guidelines on programme and project quality. However, the conditions to meet the standards are not present in all country offices, and it is not likely that country offices will fully adhere to the standards in the short term,*" UNDP management would like to point out that the entire quality assurance package for UNDP programming was adopted only in March 2016. This left little time for country offices to integrate it fully into their work prior to the assessment. UNDP recognizes that the real challenge comes with implementation, which requires an investment by the organization in staff understanding, systems, tools, support and awareness-raising. The reduction in regular resources over the last few years has made it increasingly challenging to invest in these core corporate change processes, including in the capacity required to implement at country level. Management is looking at options for ways to ensure sustainable funding for these core functions to ensure that the conditions are in place to ensure policy implementation across the organization. UNDP views improvements in institutional effectiveness as an ongoing process. A review of the project quality assurance exercise, to assess the quality of data and make recommendations on further institutionalization of this initiative as a management tool, is also planned;

(c) With regard to conclusion 3,⁴ which states "*RBM continues to be associated more with compliance-driven practices to satisfy reporting requirements, with a limited focus on learning from evidence to enhance knowledge management for decision-making and improved performance...*", UNDP management believes that the quality assurance systems

² DP/2017/21, paragraph 39.

³ DP/2017/21, paragraph 27.

⁴ DP/2017/21, paragraph 49.

are less about compliance and more about using a set of standards to benchmark performance, improve quality and manage programmatic risk. These standards are meant to help identify strengths and weaknesses and guide management actions to improve quality and results over time. The embedding of RBM in UNDP is an achievement that has been consistently highlighted and appreciated in surveys, performance reviews by partners and the RBM audit. Whether looking at CPDs as a whole or their results and resources frameworks, there has been a sea change in how programmes are designed and implemented. The assessment does not sufficiently capture institutional mechanisms that have been introduced and that have accelerated response time, improved oversight and strengthened support to country offices. The strengthening of the regional hubs has improved the provision to country offices of integrated policy and programme support which is more accessible and cost-effective. Experiences and lessons learned will aim to strengthen country offices' support mechanisms for higher-quality programming and delivery with the engagement of regional bureaux, the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support (BPPS) and the Bureau for Management Services (BMS). Furthermore, efforts are ongoing to integrate planning, monitoring, reporting and budgeting within one platform, to further strengthen the RBM culture within UNDP.

Annex. Key assessment recommendations and UNDP management response

Recommendation 1

Based on the content of the UNDAF and the guidance provided in the UNDP quality standards, country offices should ensure that the UNDP comparative advantage and value added are adequately identified by providing evidence as to why UNDP is better positioned than other institutions to implement a specific programme.

Management response

UNDP appreciates the assessment’s acknowledgement of improvement in the quality of CPDs. This is the result of clearer quality standards, more effective country support and active engagement by senior management in the appraisal of new programmes. The programme appraisal process with both the preliminary project appraisal and headquarters Project Appraisal Committee has led to more strategic, relevant and better articulated programmes according to the feedback received from Member States and the recent RBM performance audit. The added value of the CPD is well reflected in the assessments of development results conducted by the IEO; all those covering the current Strategic Plan period concluded that the UNDP contribution to national results generally has been very strong.

The UNDAF is jointly formulated by the United Nations country team for integrated programme planning to align with national development plans and priorities. UNDP fully supports the UNDAF formulation and implementation processes in partnership with other United Nations agencies. The UNDAF outcomes are developed with the core criteria of the comparative advantage and value added of the United Nations system, including individual United Nations entities. This includes a reflection on mandate, technical expertise, proven record, volume and precedent, access to development finance, thought leadership and expressed preference by development partners including programme country counterparts. UNDP then derives its programme outcomes directly from this framework. There is evidence that the UNDAF outcomes to which UNDP contributes are firmly linked to the UNDP Strategic Plan and respond to the Sustainable Development Goals and other internationally agreed agendas. Every CPD submitted to the Executive Board in 2016 responded clearly to national priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals while being firmly embedded in the UNDP Strategic Plan, using evaluation and other evidence to help explain the UNDP comparative advantage and added value in the country. This included CPDs from all regions, including those for Eritrea, Lebanon, Montenegro, Suriname and Viet Nam.

UNDP agrees on the importance of clearly identifying its comparative advantage and value added in programme plans based on evidence, including in the UNDAF and CPD. The 2016 internal analysis of lessons learned on programme quality concluded that while 82 per cent of new CPDs used evaluation to help explain the UNDP comparative advantage within the country's development sector, UNDP CPDs are still weak in identifying the organization's comparative advantage vis-à-vis other partners. In response, the guidance and template for CPDs was recently revised to include stronger guidance and clearer expectations on the added value, comparative advantage and partnership strategies of UNDP. The headquarters Project Appraisal Committee will look at this issue more closely starting in 2017. It is also worth noting that the CPDs are constrained by a 6,000-word limit, which has an effect on the issues included. UNDP would encourage that the word limit be increased in future, but agrees that the programme design must, despite the length limitation, deliberately consider comparative advantages that have been assured by the organization’s internal appraisal processes.

Guidance on developing an UNDAF has been prepared through an inter-agency process in which UNDP is an active member. The UNDAF guidance has been revised to better respond to the ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP helped to ensure that quality standards for the UNDAF will be introduced in this new guidance to address concerns relating to the weaknesses of UNDAF design. This includes highlighting the comparative advantages of the United Nations system and the added value of individual agencies. Theories of change are also being introduced for the UNDAF, which will help to ensure closer linkage between the UNDAF and agencies’ country programmes and include comparative advantage as a core criterion for selecting priority areas for the UNDAF.

Key action(s)	Time frame	Responsible unit(s)	Tracking*	
			Status	Comments
1.1 Ensure programming guidance includes emphasis on how to adequately reflect the UNDP comparative advantage based on evidence.	By December 2017	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		

1.2 The headquarters Project Appraisal Committee's quality assurance of draft country programmes to review the evidence provided in CPDs of why UNDP is better positioned than other institutions in the selected priority areas, as standard practice.	By September 2017	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		
1.3 Targeted roll-out of support to countries undergoing country programming processes to highlight how the theory of change methodology should be used to identify agency comparative advantage.	By June 2018	Regional bureaux		
<p><u>Recommendation 2</u> UNDP should ensure that all country offices fully understand and adequately practise the concept of theory of change during the programming process through a thorough assessment of the completeness and internal logic of the theory of change prior to submitting the CPDs to the Executive Board.</p>				
<p>Management response UNDP developed new extended guidance on theory of change that was adopted corporately in December 2016. For the purpose of strengthening consistency in integrating programming, UNDP has led the joint United Nations Development Group effort to elaborate inter-agency guidance on developing theories of change for the UNDAF. Any innovation will take time to consolidate and UNDP remains committed to pursuing further innovation for development. UNDP will continue to integrate theory of Change into corporate training modules, which will be a key focus in 2017. In this regard, UNDP has made much progress in crafting higher-quality CPDs based on a clear development pathway. The headquarters Project Appraisal Committee is a rigorous process and reads CPDs for evidence of a theory of change among other dimensions of quality. This will continue to be strengthened in 2017, along with key corporate decision points before the headquarters Project Appraisal Committee.</p> <p>As noted by the RBM performance audit, theory of change does not simply mean using the term "theory of change, but is rather about basing the CPD on a clear development logic using the theory of change methodology.</p>				
2.1 The preliminary project appraisal of CPDs to include a review of the completeness and internal logic of the theory of change.	By December 2017	Regional bureaux		
2.2 Targeted roll-out of support to countries undergoing country programming processes to highlight the concept of theory of change and how to apply it when designing country programmes.	By December /2017	Regional bureaux		
<p><u>Recommendation 3</u> UNDP should assess the costs of implementing the new programme and project quality assurance system to determine whether, and if so how, the resource requirements of the reformed system can be sustainably met with costed plans for a phased implementation. Based on the budget available, UNDP should prioritize the quality elements to which country offices have to adhere fully.</p>				
<p>Management response The new UNDP quality standards for programming are designed to facilitate learning and decision-making to improve quality over time, rather than functioning as a compliance-oriented checklist. The standards reflect the different attributes that contribute to quality programming, drawing on learning from various evaluations, audits, assessments and other reviews. The rating tool is designed to flag strengths and – more importantly – weaknesses, to help managers decide on what investments to make in order to improve quality. Project quality assurance is done in the corporate planning system, which means that the data can be analysed at the individual project level, across a country office programme portfolio, for projects in an entire region and for UNDP corporately. Overall performance is reviewed against the standards. If some attributes do not meet the minimum standards and cannot be readily addressed, then either a management plan is put in place to address the issues over time, or it is flagged as a programmatic risk to be monitored by management because it will affect the delivery of quality results. A management plan that reflects on actions that will be taken to improve quality based on the resources available is central to the assessment process. For example, in some crisis contexts there may not be sufficient time to prepare all of the analysis required to meet the UNDP standards for many attributes of quality programming. This does not mean that important early recovery work cannot begin. On the contrary, the quality assurance process will help managers to flag issues that should be addressed once conditions permit, lest they be forgotten during implementation.</p>				

<p>During the pilot phase, an internal UNDP assessment showed that on average it took programme staff about one hour per project per year to complete the quality assurance assessment. The greater investment is the time and resources required to improve quality, which is up to the manager to determine based on available resources. The quality assurance system will help the organization to better understand its portfolio at various levels and perform analysis that can help decision-making. UNDP will continue to assess the effectiveness of the quality assurance processes going forward, and adjust them to be in line with the new strategic plan.</p>				
3.1 Policy review of the programming standards following the closure of the 2016 project quality assurance.	By December 2017	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		
3.2 Adjustment of the parameters of quality programming – if needed - in parallel to the period of the new strategic plan, 2018-2021, and provision of related training to country offices.	By December 2021 (in parallel with the period of new strategic plan for 2018-2021)	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		
<p>Recommendation 4 UNDP should reassess the financial sustainability of the regional service centres/hubs model including the posting of the BPPS policy advisers.</p>				
<p>Management response The consolidation of the regional hubs in 2014 integrated programme support functions previously provided by the regional bureaux, BPPS policy and advisory support, management services from BMS and resource mobilization and communications support from the Bureau of External Relations and Advocacy. UNDP welcomes the findings that country offices are satisfied with the quality and timeliness of support provided by the hubs, and that the integrated support provided has contributed to enhancements in quality. As noted in the assessment report, the regional location of these services has proven to be cost-effective. UNDP management notes that regional hubs are not discrete entities with a separate financial sustainability model. In line with the new planning and budgeting approach process, the funding envelope for BPPS will be considered relative to and in collaboration with other bureaux each year, and expectedly will need to be adjusted as necessary in line with the overall resources available to UNDP. The staffing configuration of BPPS will continue to evolve in alignment with the changing business model of UNDP to assure delivery of policy and programme support services that effectively address the changing needs and demands at global, regional and country levels. In line with the cost-recovery policy approved by the Executive Board, it is further noted that UNDP has instituted measures to ensure that the costs of project advisory and other services are charged to projects.</p>				
4.1 Regular review of 2017 institutional budget implementation, and development of 2018 budget allocations.	By December 2017	Bureau for Management Services/ regional bureaux/ Bureau for Policy and Programme Support		
<p>Recommendation 5 UNDP should develop greater RBM expertise with improved focus on learning and knowledge management for enhanced effectiveness, shifting the focus from proving results to improving results. To effectively institutionalize RBM, capacity development needs to be delivered through a broad range of approaches and include all staff, from leadership and senior management to programme managers and associates. Capacity development should also extend to implementing partners, whose engagement is essential if national data sets are to improve and contribute to UNDP reporting requirements. Increased attention should also be given to promote an organizational culture that uses more effectively the conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned from evaluations and audits to contribute to knowledge management and to feed strategic and timely decision-making.</p>				
<p>Management response The recommendation is broadly in line with the UNDP assessment of the current state of knowledge and learning in the organization. Rather than merely focusing on accountability and reporting, critical reflection and learning from past experiences to improve future results are an essential part of RBM. This will require increased investment in knowledge</p>				

management capacity at country, regional and headquarters levels, training on relevant tools and methodologies and a culture that embraces constant reflection, learning and knowledge-sharing as the mandate of every team and individual staff member. Being aware of this need, already in 2016 UNDP strongly emphasized complementing the long-standing emphasis on RBM training and tools with a broad range of knowledge management approaches and solutions that analyse past experiences from the perspective of learning, enable staff to reflect and exchange on experiences on an ongoing basis, and identify resources (both content and people) that can help staff to apply this knowledge for improved results. These approaches included: analysis of lessons learned from results-oriented annual reports and decentralized evaluations from 2014 and 2015; the relaunch of the UNDP thematic knowledge networks; the roll-out of an upgraded knowledge sharing infrastructure; and the relaunch of the UNDP public library of knowledge products along with new mechanisms to measure their quality, reach and impact. UNDP is also investing in the development of an improved mechanism to track staff subject matter expertise across the organization. Recognizing the importance of “shifting the focus from proving results to improving results”, UNDP wishes to highlight that the effective use of conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned should go beyond only formal evaluations to include the more systematic leveraging of existing business processes (such as the project management cycle), informal knowledge content and staff interactions for future learning. To this end, UNDP will design and add a tool for capturing lessons learned in the corporate project management space.

Improving capacities of national implementing partners for RBM has been included in the new UNDP quality standards for programming, and should be considered in all projects where resources are available. The standards also include considering evidence learned from evaluations, audits and other sources of knowledge in the design and implementation of programmes and projects, and for decision-making. UNDP agrees that quality standards alone are not enough; it is crucial that staff and partners be capacitated and adequate resources made available in order to meet these standards. UNDP will therefore continue monitoring how strengthened capacities lead to a better RBM culture for learning and changing going forward.

5.1 Develop coherent RBM training modules in line with the new strategic plan, integrated results and resources framework, policies and procedures and incorporate an RBM training component in the induction courses for resident coordinators and resident representatives, training for country directors and deputy country directors, training for Junior Professional Officers and regional training and workshops.	By March 2018	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		
5.2 Develop a RBM/programme management certificate for staff.	By December 2018	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		
5.3 Deliver RBM/programme management training to programme staff, including managers.	Ongoing with no due date	Regional bureaux		
5.4 Develop a staff expertise mapping and search system (“People Search” talent map) to enable offices to locate subject matter experts, including monitoring and evaluation.	By December 2018	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group, Bureau for Management Services, Office of Human Resources		

Recommendation 6

UNDP leadership should prioritize investment in knowledge management, going beyond capturing best practices to using lessons learned from each context of success and failure to

contribute to effectiveness and improve results. The role of leadership is pivotal in ensuring an enabling environment and support for UNDP to enhance engagement and communication to further develop a results-based culture throughout the organization that welcomes critical reflection on performance and effective knowledge management to improve results, where successes but also failures are important vehicles of learning. Leadership should effectively encourage a “results culture” which goes beyond reporting and understands RBM in terms of continuous organizational self-learning from both successes and failure and from innovation, and not just monitoring and evaluation for reporting purposes.

Management response

UNDP agrees with the assessment that the role of leadership is pivotal in ensuring an enabling environment for knowledge management to improve results, which needs to include systematic reflection and learning from both successes and failures. UNDP wishes to highlight some of the important steps taken in the above direction, to promote and foster a results-based culture and to complement the already noted mechanisms and tools to improve the quality of programmes and projects. In this regard, in 2016 UNDP relaunched its thematic knowledge networks following a hiatus and consolidated its information and communication technology-based systems in support of knowledge management and knowledge sharing under the Microsoft Office 365 environment. In 2017, this will be complemented with dedicated training and outreach efforts to enable staff to use these mechanisms effectively for learning and knowledge exchange. Further, UNDP has taken practical steps to operationalize self-learning from experiments, from what works and what does not, through the establishment of the Innovation Facility in 2014. A key component of the mandate of this Facility is the provision of risk capital and advisory services to country offices to test new approaches to solve development problems. The Innovation Facility documents successes and lessons, based on failures, in its annual reviews and through frequent blogging. UNDP remains committed to testing innovations for development and to identify the drivers of failure for improved performance. The Facility’s work has shown that a focus on failure is less conducive to source valuable lessons from country offices compared to qualitative questions that strive to identify actionable lessons.

In addition, UNDP introduced the Integrated Results and Resources Framework (IRRF) and the "Report Card" in the annual report of the Administrator and midterm review of the Strategic Plan, as the organization’s accountability mechanism against the Strategic Plan, 2014-2017. The IRRF and Report Card, which serve as a base for performance dialogue with the Executive Board, pay special attention to "failure" by investigating root causes of low performance. The system will allow UNDP to improve the policy and oversight support from the headquarters and programming at country level. In the new strategic plan, UNDP will introduce a robust results framework and tighter linkages between results and resources, which will make all levels of the organization accountable for results and enhance the capacity to analyse the root causes of low performance. UNDP also continues to strengthen integrated reporting and work closely with country offices on strengthening the different aspects of reporting, and the understanding of how they complement each other.

6.1 Production of the annual report of the Administrator, including the analysis of factors of low performance, to enable organizational learning and dialogue with Executive Board members to take concrete actions to achieve higher results.	Annually by June	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		
6.2 Strengthen the mechanism to analyse low performance and hindering factors in the monitoring and reporting systems.	By June 2018	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		
6.3 Develop and introduce the lessons learned "capture tab" into the corporate project management space (in the Corporate Strategic Planning System)	By December 2017	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group, Executive Office		
6.4 Curate growth of the UNDP knowledge networks as a vessel for sharing knowledge, and lessons learned and for critical self-reflection on programme effectiveness	By December 2017	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group and		

		Professions		
6.5 Produce a yearly lesson learned analysis of trends emerging from: (a) results-oriented annual report data; and (b) CPDs being submitted to the Executive Board	By December 2017	Bureau for Policy and Programme Support/Development Impact Group		

* The implementation status is tracked in the Evaluation Resource Centre.
